

HOW OUR PARADIGMS LIMIT OUR MEASURES

JACQUI FROST

University of Minnesota

jacquifrost@gmail.com

The motivating question driving this special feature asks: “is secularism a World Religion?” However, Donovan Schaefer and Chris Cotter’s conversation is ultimately much less about whether or not secularism *could* be categorized and taught within the framework of the World Religions Paradigm, and more about whether or not it *should* be. There seems to be a consensus, which I agree with, that secular and nonreligious people¹ constitute a key demographic of interest to scholars of religion and, given the parameters of the paradigm, secularism could indeed stand its own as a “World Religion.” Instead, Schaefer and Cotter consider the costs and benefits of such an approach, especially given the many pitfalls and criticisms that come with the WRP itself. At the core of their discussion is a concern about the exclusion of secularism studies in religious studies courses. For Schaefer, the benefits of “shuffling the deck of secularism studies into the deck of the World Religions Paradigm” (4) outweigh the costs because it appears to be a viable way to engage students in discussions about the history and ideologies of secularism. While I agree with Schaefer that secularism studies should become a more central component of religious studies courses, I want to build from the original responses by Tenzan Eaghll and James Murphy to raise concerns about Schaefer’s approach regarding the reification of both religion and secularism as stable and coherent categories. Below, I highlight some of the potentially harmful consequences these theoretical moves might have for our methodolog-

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1. Terminological debates abound in the study of secularism and nonreligion. I typically draw on Lois Lee’s definition of nonreligion as “any phenomenon – position, perspective, or practice – that is primarily understood in relation to religion, but which is not itself considered to be religious” (2015, 32). Lee argues for keeping the terms “nonreligion” and “secularism” separate, with “secular” denoting *areligious* phenomena for which religion is not a concern and “non-religious” denoting phenomena built *in direct relation to* religion (e.g. atheism). However, in this response, I use these terms interchangeably in order to speak across disciplinary boundaries about the variety of both secular and nonreligious cultures I believe the term “secularism” is meant to convey in this discussion.

ical approaches to studying religion and secularism. Then, with Murphy, I conclude by pointing to some useful strategies and concepts from social science that offer potential solutions to these problems, both pedagogically and methodologically.

As a sociologist, I have had less engagement with the World Religions Paradigm itself than those in religious studies, but I experience its effects on our methodological approaches and survey measures all the time. The religions that the WRP considers to be dominant, either due to number of adherents or cultural significance, are typically the only categories included in social scientific surveys attempting to measure religious identities, beliefs, and practices. So, if a respondent does not identify with one of the five to seven major religious categories presented to them (e.g. Protestant, Muslim, Jewish), then they are either grouped into an “other religion” category or a “no religion” category. There are numerous problems with this approach, two of which are especially instructive for our discussion here. First, these categories, and the studies produced from them, often assume that respondents have stable and coherent religious or nonreligious identities and beliefs that will have a uniform effect on their social actions. As Cotter and Robertson (2016) explain in their overview of the history and criticisms of the World Religions Paradigm: “we see this logic at work in the administration of ‘religion’ through censuses and other state apparatus, where the WRP-inflected presumption is that an individual will be an adherent of a single ‘faith’ in a simple either-or binary, and that the number of adherents of specific traditions relates in some way to their legitimacy” (9). Thus, both the WRP and our social surveys that are built on it fail to capture the fluid, incoherent, and intersectional nature of religious and nonreligious beliefs and identities (see Chaves 2010; Cotter 2015; Frost and Edgell 2017; Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010).

A related problem with this methodological approach is that those grouped into the “other religion” and “no religion” categories typically end up playing the role of the reference group; diverse identities and beliefs – from atheism, to Buddhism, to Wicca – are grouped together and treated as a homogenous category against which the “dominant” religions can be compared. An example of this can be seen in both popular and academic writing on the rise of the “Nones” as a population of interest (e.g. Audi 2015; Lipka 2015). As the number of religiously unaffiliated people has risen in western countries like the United States, Canada, and the UK, researchers have started directing their attention to those who check “none” or “no religion” on social scientific surveys and have begun answering important questions about the characteristics of this rising demographic. However, while the increased attention to the “Nones” is

a promising step and has yielded some fruitful analyses that have shed more light on the demographics, beliefs, and behaviors of the religiously unaffiliated, this catch-all label misses important heterogeneity among the nonreligious and can work to perpetuate inaccurate and negative stereotypes about the nonreligious.

For example, in research I've done with Penny Edgell and the American Mosaic Project at the University of Minnesota, we show that treating nonreligion as a reference category in quantitative studies of civic engagement elides important differences in engagement *among* nonreligious groups (Frost and Edgell 2018). While social scientific research has all but reached a consensus that the religious are more likely to volunteer and get involved with their communities than the nonreligious, the studies that these claims are based on almost always group all nonreligious people into one reference category. In our analysis that separates the nonreligious into smaller, more distinct subgroups (Frost and Edgell 2018), we find that atheists are just as likely to volunteer as are the religious, but low participation among agnostics and “nothing in particulars” often drives the negative relationships found when varied nonreligious identities and beliefs are combined into a single measure and compared with the religious. In short, negative stereotypes about the nonreligious as antisocial and elitist (see Edgell et al. 2016) are perpetuated by much of our social scientific research that fails to consider the heterogeneity of those who fall into the larger “none” category.

It is at the intersection of these two problems I've raised that I see Schaefer's suggestion to “shuffle secularism into the deck of the World Religions Paradigm” (4) as potentially problematic. I agree that Schaefer's move to set up a dichotomy between religions and their related “secularisms” (6–7) is potentially a great way to bring more attention to various forms of secularism and nonreligion in religious studies classrooms. However, the grouping off of large swaths of diverse nonreligious people into a ‘secular’ catch-all category – even if we have a secular category related to each dominant religion category – will likely have problematic consequences for the ways these categories are operationalized in our research. As with the move to add the “Nones” to our list of survey categories, the move to add secularism to the list of World Religions seems to promise inclusion into a system where categories of belief and practice are reified as static and homogeneous, which only does a disservice to our understandings of both religion and secularism. While Schaefer is right that there are numerous different “formations of the secular” (*a la* Asad 2003) and that secular and nonreligious cultures will vary depending on the specific context and history in which they are developed (7), I would argue that this

does not take the heterogeneity of secularism, or religiosity for that matter, seriously enough.

One potential way out of this conundrum is to ditch the religion *vs.* secular dichotomy altogether and develop new concepts and measures that break down these binaries. Scholars in the social sciences have already started to do this, and as James Murphy points out in his original response, taking a step back to assess how both religion and secularism fit into a wider frame of “existential cultures” that exist on a spectrum from religious to secular may be the most fruitful way forward (e.g. Lee 2015). One useful concept within this approach comes from Joseph Baker and Buster Smith’s (2015) book *American Secularism* where they argue for a more cultural understanding of secularity. Instead of positing secularity and religion as opposites, Baker and Smith argue that these perspectives should be seen as being on a continuum – every individual is in a constant process of meaning making, and each individual varies in terms of how much use they make of religion in order to make that meaning. The authors deploy the concept of “cosmic belief systems” to denote this continuum and they argue that both secularity and religion represent a diverse array of substantive philosophical positions on this continuum. A related conceptual tool comes from scholars like Taves, Asprem, and Ihm (2018) who argue that we should move away from the language of religion *v.s.* secularism and toward a language of “worldviews” that encapsulates the “big questions” that both religious and nonreligious individuals ask and attempt to answer, like “what exists,” “what is good,” and “where am I going?” As Taves *et al.* explain, “locating atheism and agnosticism as partial answers to the big question of ‘what exists’ allows us to ask to what extent the worldviews of atheists and agnostics otherwise overlap with the worldviews of theists (and vice versa) and what the implications of these worldview differences might be” (2018, 208).

I see these moves to characterize religious and nonreligious beliefs as all being part of larger “existential cultures” and “cosmic worldviews” to be a productive way forward, both methodologically and pedagogically. Methodologically, this move forces us to rethink many of our taken-for-granted categories and survey questions that characterize religions as substantive and stable sets of beliefs and practices that secular and nonreligious people simply lack. And pedagogically, these concepts give us and our students a language for talking about both religion and secularism that avoids reifying either and reveals the underlying similarities among what are typically thought of as dichotomous categories. In sum, while I agree with Schaefer that secularism *could* be included into the World Religions Paradigm, I do not necessarily think that it *should* be, especially given how our paradigms

so often limit how we operationalize our categories into measures and the consequences those limits have for our understandings of lived religious and nonreligious experiences.

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