

Race and Secularism in America. Edited by Jonathon S. Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. Pp. 288. \$30.00 (paper). ISBN: 978-0231174916.

President Donald Trump’s meeting with black religious leaders to discuss criminal justice reform in August 2018 was roiled with controversy. The controversy was not centered on accusations of blurred lines between church and state and the involvement of clergy in secular policy issues. Rather, public concern and dismay focused on the clergy’s inability to have a meaningful dialogue about criminal justice reform during the meeting. The meeting turned out to be an opportunity for the president to be photographed with—and seemingly endorsed by—black leaders; it denied the prophetic voice of the black church on a matter directly affecting its communities and constituents.

The challenges presented by the clergy meeting with Trump provide a glimpse into the intersections of race, religion, and secularism—where religion is sanitized if not sterilized, and race is used for political gain at the expense of those who have been racialized. The collection of essays in *Race and Secularism in America* offers a probing, multidisciplinary analysis of these intersections. By providing insights from scholars in the fields of political theory, religious studies, history, literature, anthropology, and theology, Jonathon S. Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd critically examine how race and religion are managed and marginalized in contemporary iterations of “secularism.” Taken together, these essays posit that secularism manages the practices and bodies of ordinary people and their exercise of power—not just in religion but in race relations, as well. Further, the processes and projects of secularization have transitioned over time from management to exclusion. This exclusion is manifest in the removal of religion from the public sphere, and the absence of blacks and black religion from leading analyses of secularism. Kahn and Lloyd hope to break new ground in the theory of secularism by finally including race in scholarly analyses of secularism.

One of the strengths of the book is its organization. The editors frame the analysis of race and secularism with an introduction by Lloyd and a conclusion by Kahn. Both argue that discussions about secularism and race are ultimately discussions about justice: Who is counted as part of the political community, and who matters? Given the privatization of non-white religion and the colonization and oppression by whites of the racialized other, the editors conclude that “whiteness is secular, and the secular is white” (5). They question whether it is even possible to understand secularism without first understanding whiteness.

To develop this thesis, Lloyd and Kahn strategically organize the eight essays into three sections, titled, respectively, “Orientations,” “Readings,” and “Inflections.” Essays in the first section describe the political theology of America in terms of the tensions between white supremacy and the resulting insurgency by the black church, with the religion of African Americans acting as a counterbalance against secularizing forces and trends in the United States. The second section presents three case studies that define (or perhaps redefine) the meaning of “secular” within the context of black religion. The third section expands the issue of secularism-as-whiteness by approaching race and secularism from novel perspectives. The book closes with an afterword that expands the inquiry still further to consider the place of gender and sexuality.

In part one of the book, George Shulman critically engages the work of Carl Schmitt to assert that there is an under-acknowledged, but ever-present sovereignty in America—the sovereignty of white supremacy. This sovereignty creates a “racial state of exception” that is invisible because it is ordinary and permanent (29). He then suggests that black theologians and thinkers have provided a

counter-theology that exposes how the secularization thesis sanitizes and compartmentalizes religious life as part of the processes by which sovereign power constitutes a racial state of exception.

Next, Josef Sorett describes the trope of black sacred/secular fluidity, which suggests that blacks are a hyper-religious foil against the “secularizing zeitgeist” (47) in American society. The trope posits black communities are both sacred and profane, and yet have no secular presence or force. With this trope, white sovereignty and secularism become connected as race is managed through the rhetoric of religious difference between blacks and whites.

The case studies in part two of the book ground the theories of a racial state of exception—wherein whiteness is sovereign and black religion is a foil against secularism—by providing concrete definitions and examples of “the secular.” Edward J. Blum challenges the seminal works of Charles Taylor and John Lardas Modern by recounting the remarkable story of Henry “Box” Brown, a slave who mailed himself by post to freedom in 1849. The idea that people became disembodied selves as secularism progressed in the nineteenth century is wrong, Blum argues. Black slaves were not less embodied; instead, they were embodied possessions of the white masters who controlled them. Blum’s essay provides an illustration of whiteness as sovereign. Even in the historiography of secularism, he shows, scholars neglect the lived experiences of blacks. In describing Brown’s belief that whites were devils because they practiced the brutal institution of slavery, Blum provides a perspective of black religion as true religion that is pure and undefiled over and against the worldly sin of owning and controlling others.

Erica R. Edwards’s essay next provides an innovative foray into the concept of black secularism. Edwards examines the “resurrection” of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in recent years in popular media, whereby he is portrayed not as a charismatic *religious* leader fighting for civil rights, but as a charismatic *secular* leader. She describes charismatic leadership in postmodernity as a romanticized call to return to the past of the male-dominated household in the black family.

Joel Blecher and Joshua Dubler provide an interesting look into Philadelphia’s Salafi community, a community of African Americans practicing a form of Sunni Islam guided by leaders from the Arabian Peninsula. For Salafis, defining the secular is easy: It is anything not guided by the Salafi leadership, which includes improper engagement with issues of race or politics. Secularism includes black religion (even other black Muslims) insofar as the primary focus of the work is the betterment of the black community in America. This is contrary to the Salafi practice of quietism. For this community, black religion is bad religion—it is not Sorett’s foil against secularism, but instead it is an example of secularism.

Part three of the book offers novel perspectives on the theoretical and historical narratives of secularism explored in previous chapters. M. Cooper Harriss explores the theological underpinnings of racial invisibility (as developed by Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* [1952]), a secular concept for the management of race. This “invisible theology of race” (155) is one in which racial ideologies have served as secular surrogates denoting what is material versus what is immaterial (or who counts and who does not count). After 9/11, the war on terror inverted racial invisibility: race became visible as Muslims were racialized, and the state became invisible as it hid its progressively expansive surveillance techniques.

William D. Hart’s essay on “secular coloniality” (178) dissects the history of three colonial tropes rooted in religious constructions of racial identity—fetish, voodoo, and frenzy—and argues that their transition to secular, general usage did not sanitize their racist implications. Instead, the white supremacy of secularism just gave the tropes a new, extended life.

Willie James Jennings examines the nature of the secular in a historical context by looking at Spanish colonization of Peru through the contemporaneous writings and artwork of an indigenous Peruvian in the seventeenth century named Guaman Poma. For colonizers, the time and space

between when the land and people were emptied of demonic forces and when they were filled with the Christian faith is deemed secular. In this case, the secular is the lack of indigenous spiritual beliefs as well as the lack of Christian faith. The white supremacy of colonialization is evident in the depiction of the Spanish in Poma's art: despite committing widespread atrocities against the local populations, the Spanish are never portrayed as demonic. They still occupied redeemed space, contrary to the indigenous people.

Jonathon Kahn's conclusion encapsulates themes recurring throughout the book. He notes that the secularization thesis discussed throughout the book transitioned from the traditional understanding of secularism, where the concern is religion in the public sphere, to the "new secular" (241), which is about recognition and place in society. Essentially, the secular has become a "deeply contested language of justice" (243). He argues that conversations on secularism should help society see who and what is being denied the status of the real.

Although the contributors approach issues of race and secularism from different perspectives and disciplines, this book offers a cohesive and thoughtful dialogue between scholars that supports the goal of uncovering the power dynamics undergirding secularism. One reason for this cohesiveness is the engagement among the authors and editors with each other's works. Several contributors reference Lloyd's introduction as a starting point for their essays, in particular his observation that black religion shows how modernity cannot subdue its racial subjects as easily as it has subdued its religious subjects. Several authors also engage Charles Taylor's discussion of the "buffered self" in *A Secular Age* (2007). The interplay of this concept with the lived experiences of African Americans is referenced throughout the anthology.

Readers who are new to scholarly discussions of secularism and secularization should read Kahn's conclusion before reading the rest of the book. The essays in part three of the book, as currently presented, are overly abstract and may be inaccessible to readers who are unfamiliar with scholarly discourse on secularism and secularization. Kahn suggests an alternative organization or framing of the essays. First, he notes, in the essays of Hart (racial tropes), Shulman (white supremacy and black insurgency), and Jennings (secular space in colonized Peru), "the secular" represents colonial discourse, and the pressures of secularization represent pressures of whiteness and white supremacy. Second, he notes that the work of Harriss (invisible theology) and Blum (slaves as embodied possessions) categorize who counts and who does not—who is fully human and who is not. Finally, he suggests that the essays of Edwards (charismatic leadership in media), Dubler/Blecher (Salafism), and Sorrett (trope of black sacred/secular fluidity) demonstrate the complexity of black religions' engagement in dialectical struggles with the secular modern in ways that contest the framing of the secular age around the "buffered self." This reordering of the essays presents an improved structure for the book—in particular, one that better grounds and contextualizes the third cluster of essays. Further, Kahn's distillation of secularism as a call to justice may be a better way to begin the anthology.

The collection would also be strengthened by adding an additional voice to the conversation, namely, a legal scholar. If secularization has power, it is at least partly due to the legal regimes that create and enforce that power. The cultural traditions fostering white supremacy would have little salience if it were not for the structures of law undergirding their domination of the other. Law is a key factor in the removal of religion from the public sphere; law and legal institutions dictate the extent to which religion must remain in the private sphere; and, law further circumscribes the authority of religious ideas, institutions, and individuals to regulate the private religious sphere. It would be illuminating for a legal scholar to explore the nexus of race, secularism, and law in conversation with the scholars who contributed to this volume.

This omission may be appropriate, however, insofar as this anthology is more descriptive than prescriptive. It is content with detailing different facets of the intersections of race and secularism. As Lloyd notes in the introduction, this work is intended to “uncover the racial and religious formations that are rendered illegible under the current secularization regime and to demonstrate their political potency” (4). In this way, Kahn and Lloyd are like doctors who must first diagnose the problem before they can cure it. One hopes that as the contributors deepen their understanding of these intersections, they will provide another volume of work to answer the powerful claims by Tracy Fessenden in the afterword that secularism has not brought freedom and justice for women or racial minorities. Perhaps adding law to the analysis will help explore options for providing justice. At any rate, as Hart says, religion and secularism are conjoined twins where the secular is the internal other of religion (179–80). This collection has tasked both with the responsibility of correcting racial injustice.

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