

Rebekka Habermas, ed., *Negotiating the Secular and the Religious in the German Empire: Transnational Approaches*, Berghahn: Oxford, 2019; 244 pp., 9781789201512, £85.00 (hbk)

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Beginning from the proposition that the concepts ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ are mutually constitutive categories that should be studied in concrete time and space rather than as abstract and stable concepts, this collection of essays aims to scrutinize the changing nature of religiosity and secularity in the German Empire. It positions itself, perhaps a little too strenuously, as a transnational study and, with more justification, promises to demonstrate how both the religious and the secular were constructed through concrete practices and intellectual interventions.

These interventions are treated very differently by the different authors, with some focusing on the history of ideas, while others take a more empiricist approach to social developments. An early example of the former is the contribution by Wolfgang Knöbl, which discusses the views of religion held by well-known figures such as Max Weber, Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, in an attempt to reintegrate them firmly into the history of their period. In the same way, Lucian Hölscher weaves his way through a conceptual history of German secularism, charting its rise, as he sees it, as an offshoot of Protestant liberalism. To the extent that secularism was a coherent position during this period, Hölscher argues, it was a position guided by ‘some kind of religious or transcendent idea’ (105), rather than any kind of precocious incredulity towards metanarratives.

Turning to ‘scientific theology’, Paul Michael Kurtz offers a detailed portrait of the appropriation of the Jewish past of Palestine by German Christians as the pre-history of Christian Europe, which he quite appropriately terms a ‘colonization of history’ that muted the Jewish past in an attempt to amplify a Christian origins story (56–7). This closely researched and cogent chapter is good as far as it goes. Curiously absent, however, is the logical third arm of this ‘socially sanctioned activity of silencing’ (78), namely the *Kaiserreich* era silencing of Palestine’s Islamic present, which remains unmentioned in this chapter, notwithstanding some oblique references to ‘Arabs’ and German comparisons of ‘Semitic peoples’, despite the fact that Palestine’s Christian and Jewish histories both had to be read through the palimpsest of hundreds of years of Islamic history.

In her chapter, Rebekka Habermas discusses ‘situational secularity’ (116), in which she seeks to understand the social and cultural preconditions for the development of German secularism, and its relationship to religion. Beginning with the unsurprising finding that secularists were predominantly (but not exclusively) white

and male, she moves on to demonstrate that secularism in Imperial Germany was not so much a fiercely anti-religious stance as a critique of expressions of religion that were emotional and public performances of exaggerated piety. Paradoxically, Habermas argues, the heated tone of secularist debate regarding an appropriate comportment towards religious affairs often belied the ostensible commitment to a sober public rationality.

The volume ends strongly with three nicely connected chapters offering detailed case studies that highlight how ideas of the religious and the secular made their way into practice. The first of the three is Carolin Kosuch's discussion of what secularism, with its Christian connotations, meant to German-Jewish anarchists like Gustav Landauer and Erich Mühsam. Kosuch cleverly and convincingly makes the case that the type of freedom championed by these figures, and their desire to repair the world, drew from clearly evident strands of Jewish thought, despite its obvious worldliness.

In one of the few truly transnational contributions, Relinda Meiwes shifts the lens to Catholicism, pointing out that the 'entanglement of the religious with the secular' (172) was quite frequently the natural terrain of female Catholic orders, who worked both in Germany and elsewhere under papal rather than local authority. Meiwes argues that the bounds between religious and non-religious tasks were consistently blurred for these orders, which worked in health, welfare and education all over the world. In some ways, Meiwes' argument complements that made by Kosuch, insofar as Kosuch's anarchists served secular goals via religious categories, while Meiwes' Catholic sisters served religious ends through secular interventions in the world.

Much the same is true of the final chapter by Richard Hölzl and Karolin Wetjen on German missions, which also points out that 'missions hardly ever made clear distinctions between a religious and a secular colonial sphere' (197). More than Meiwes, however, Hölzl and Wetjen foreground the intrinsically colonial logic of these missions. Some may take issue with their claim that missions offered, at least in part, 'idealist aims beyond material and exploitative strategies of contemporary liberalism' (220), but the chapter certainly succeeds in its attempt to portray the epistemic conundrums of missionaries grappling with the question of what constituted a minimum threshold for conversions in the contact zone.

Although perhaps inflating the novelty of its approach towards secularism, taken as a whole, the volume offers a range of very useful answers to the difficult question of how to conceptualize and study the relationship between the religious and the secular in the German Empire. It takes the role of politics and the state seriously, but illustrates the myriad ways in which non-state actors were central to the process of redefining the secular in relation to the religious. It resists easy progress narratives of a gradual transition from a benighted state of religiosity towards an enlightened, secular one, and successfully historicizes a number of instances of the 'constant making and unmaking of the religious and the secular' (15) in Germany and beyond.