

Book Review

***Negotiating the Secular and the Religious in the German Empire: Transnational Approaches.* Edited by Rebekka Habermas. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. 2019. vi + 238 pp. \$135.00 (hardback).**

This volume appears in Berghahn Books' always provocative 'New German Historical Perspectives' series. It advances two related claims. The first is that studies of modern German religion, which have increased steadily since the 'Confessional Turn' in historiography occurred some thirty years ago, and studies of modern German secularism, a newer but no less promising field of inquiry that has already brought forward important findings, should be conducted in the same analytical frame. Such an arrangement is advisable, Rebekka Habermas explains, because religion and secularism in the era were not negations of one another. They existed, in fact, in a productive relationship of give and take: inasmuch as religion was plural in its forms and impinged upon by secular ideas and movements, so also was secularism plural in its forms and impinged upon by religious ideas and movements. By considering religion and secularism together, secular studies in particular stand to gain surprising insights into secularism's indebtedness to and in some cases dependence upon religion for its justifications, symbolic referents, vocabularies and programmatic visions. Even Max Weber's celebrated sociology of religion, long understood as a Himalayan accomplishment of timeless secular thought, is best understood as bounded temporally and determined conceptually by the terms of contemporary religious developments.

The volume's second claim is that a closely coordinated study of religion and secularism will benefit from transnational perspectives. First of all, defenders of both religion and secularism routinely referred to spaces beyond German borders. And second, while classical accounts of globalization in the long nineteenth century and especially during the German Empire (1871–1918) highlight secular economics, scientific knowledge production, and statecraft, some of the most influential actors—and actresses—in global affairs were religiously committed individuals. Their manifold activities in social, intellectual, and political transference in colonial zones, which drew their élan from commingled religious and secular motives, drove globalization forward. The study of global encounters, then, expands suggestively the contexts in which German religion and secularism made and unmade one another.

In view of these considerations, we should not be surprised to find that the volume's analytical axis, which deserves but does not receive precise theoretical definition, is 'entanglement': the entanglement of religion and secularism at home and in the entangling environments of German-indigenous interactions abroad. The volume's seven essays elaborate upon what these entanglements implied for German history, especially at the *fin-de-siècle*. The essays fall into three sections, all playing upon the relationship between the religious and the secular: 'Scientific Debates', which considers new academic understandings of religion and secularism in the German Empire; 'Public Debates', which examines popular understandings of the terms and how they related to one another in the cut and thrust of cultural contest; and 'Negotiating Boundaries', which probes the frontiers between religion and secularism in Germany proper and in its colonies in sub-Saharan Africa.

All of the essays align firmly with the thematic intentions of a volume of real interpretive creativity. For example, Paul Michael Kurtz demonstrates how secular university scholars in such fields as archaeology and ethnography made use of Protestant biblical exegesis in imagining a Palestine whose ancient history belonged not to Jewish Palestinians, but to Christian Europeans. In accord with traditional Christian supersessionism, German secular scientists hereby ‘colonized’ territory abroad in order to confirm ‘the genealogy of Christian origins’ important to believers at home (p. 57). Carolin Kosuch shows us the German-Jewish anarchists Gustav Landauer (1870–1919) and Erich Mühsam (1878–1934). Their secular ‘iterations’ capitalized upon such religious ideas as Protestant *Bildung*, a biblical creation motif by which they were gods making themselves into beings of their own liking, and nostalgia for the organic communal relationships of the Catholic Middle Ages that offered an alternative to the hierarchies and uniformities of modern life. In such religious gardens were dreams of a secular and stateless global order planted. The contribution by Relinde Meiwes, as well as the co-authored essay by Richard Hölzl and Karolin Wetjen, contest powerfully the view of colonialism as an exclusively secular project. Religious missionaries, in fact, were ‘key brokers of cultural contact and agents of cultural translation’ in imperial zones (Hölzl and Wetjen, p. 197). The missionaries’ close interactions with native peoples in education, health care provision, and social outreach relayed knowledge and information from Germany to imperial lands and back again via their international networks of personal and institutional contacts. In doing so, they constantly reworked the religious and secular frameworks of colonial endeavour.

This impressive collection of essays is not the only one to appear recently on the transnational dimensions of modern German religion. One thinks, for example, of Andreas Henkelmann et al. (eds.), *Katholizismus transnational. Beiträge zur Zeitgeschichte und Gegenwart in Westeuropa und den Vereinigten Staaten* (Münster, 2019). To the present volume’s credit, however, it goes beyond Catholics to include Protestants, Jews, and secularists, too, realizing in desire and design Todd Weir’s preference for a ‘quadricconfessional’ analysis of all groups making claims to significance on the contested religious landscape of modern Germany (Todd H. Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession* [New York, 2014]). Such a ranging embrace is essential if ‘entanglement’ as a theory and interpretive device can help us comprehend these claims, which drew and re-drew perpetually the boundaries separating the religious and the secular. The volume, which wanted tighter copyediting of contributions by non-English speakers, contains some eighty pages of notes and bibliographies, along with an index.

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