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BRINGING REFLEXIVE RELIGIOUS STUDIES INTO HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP ON AMERICAN RELIGION

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In his 2017 book [*The Myth of Disenchantment*](#), Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm called for the development of a new disciplinary paradigm which he termed “reflexive religious studies.” Influenced by critical scholarship in sociology, Josephson-Storm argued that religious studies must similarly do more to recognize how the ideas, claims, and critiques from within this supposedly-detached academic field nevertheless discursively shape and inform—and thus invariably transform—the broader social systems into which they are introduced. Crafting novel theoretical and methodological



Interior of the First Secular Church of McMinnville, “erected in the interest of SCIENCE, SECULARISM and MENTAL LIBERTY” by the Oregon State Secular Union

frameworks that would draw increased scholarly attention to this dynamic, according to Josephson-Storm, is imperative. Perhaps most importantly, it would provide scholars with the tools needed to better reckon with the politico-ethical underpinnings and consequences of the arguments they make, the interventions they encourage, and the second-order analytic categories they deploy in their academic writing.

In many ways, Josephson-Storm's argument seems a good fit for a field so often preoccupied with the "[problem of definition](#)." Indeed, religious studies in recent decades has been strongly influenced by the works of Talal Asad, Tomoko Masuzawa, and many others who have pushed scholars to more deeply engage the socially constructed nature of the category of "religion," and in particular the Christocentric, colonialist, and racializing underpinnings that inform the term's contemporary understandings.

Yet, at the same time, the vision of a truly reflexive religious studies remains inchoate. In part, this is because religious studies is not intellectually monolithic. Rather, it better resembles, [as Kathryn Lofton puts it](#), a "curio cabinet" of thinkers often collected together by little more than their shared interest in topics revolving in some way around the abstract category of "religion." Ideas therefore disperse unevenly, and many scholars of religion—myself included—awkwardly straddle religious studies and another academic discipline, one with its own disciplinary debates and contentions.

As an early-career historian of American religion, I have witnessed firsthand the tensions that sometimes emerge when critical frameworks of religious studies are introduced into the field of history in particular. To be sure, few historians today would refuse to recognize the socially constructed nature of "religion." Yet concern for the closely particularizing empirical work that defines the historical profession nonetheless leads some to fret over discursive analyses of social categories and the cultural discourses in which they operate, and especially the possibility that these studies might be displacing more conventional social or intellectual histories.

What, then, might reflexive religious studies look like for those whose principal method of scholarly analysis is history?

(OSSU) in the 1890s. The OSSU represents just one of a number of organizations that sought to advance "secularism" during the Golden Age of Freethought, and their writings help illuminate what a particular group of turn-of-the-century Americans popularly understood "secularism" to mean. Note the images of Robert Ingersoll and Thomas Paine to the left and right of the stage, respectively. [Source](#).

Though neither intends to answer this question directly, K. Healan Gaston's *Imagining Judeo-Christian America* and Jolyon's Thomas's *Faking Liberties* in many ways model for future scholars what a self-consciously reflexive approach to the study of religious history may look like.

What unites Gaston and Thomas's works is their shared commitment to historically tracing and critically analyzing the discourse surrounding what conceptual historians term "essentially contested concepts"—for Thomas, "religious freedom," and for Gaston, "Judeo-Christian." In doing so, both writers seek to elucidate the ways in which their chosen concept has been invoked, defined, and/or rhetorically deployed in different historically located citations.

Neither text offers any essentialist claims regarding how these terms *should* be defined. Rather, they recognize that the meaning of a given term is always contested, dialectically informed by the cultural and social contexts in which it is invoked. Gaston, for instance, explores the diverse "exceptionalist" and "pluralist" uses of the term "Judeo-Christian" over the twentieth century, highlighting how these "two constellations of interrelated ideas and sensibilities [] tended to push concrete human actors in opposite directions" which subsequently "helped to create the world we have inherited." In Thomas's introduction, he similarly explains that the central concern of his book is not a normative determination of whether religious freedom indeed existed in pre-Occupation Japan, but rather "the politics and ethics of who gets to define the operative terms" that influence what different historical actors deem "religious freedom" as a concept indeed to mean.

As these authors poignantly demonstrate throughout their works, the shifts, rearticulations, and collisions that occur in usage and meaning provide an invaluable window into the processes by which political ideas, social subjectivities, and epistemological frameworks change over time as well as the impact of these changes on individuals' lived experiences. And in doing so, both texts offer sophisticated analyses of particular discursive terrains and thereby indicate by example what other historical subfields—social history, intellectual history, political history—might gain from attending more deeply to the conceptual categories found in their primary sources.

Notably, Gaston and Thomas also work to integrate scholars of religion and other public intellectuals into their narratives *as historical actors* rather than solely as secondary-source commentators. Thomas, for example dedicates two full chapters (Chapters 4 and 8) to examining the role that academic scholarship on religion played in discourses surrounding religious freedom in Japan both before and during the US Occupation, whereas Gaston intricately weaves a myriad of scholars and public intellectuals—such as Will Herberg and Reinhold Niebuhr—into her analysis.

Moreover, both also seek to thread a difficult theoretical needle that often proves difficult for historians: in their respective introductions, Thomas and Gaston each reflect upon the difficulties and theoretical limitations of being “historically descriptive” (to borrow Thomas’s phrase) while still recognizing the various politico-ethical motivations and implications of their respective works.

In these regards, both texts offer significant methodological and theoretical interventions that early-career historians influenced by contemporary conversations in religious studies may reflect upon, emulate in their own approaches, and, indeed, even critique as scholarship continues to grapple with how best to integrate the interventions of religious studies into historical writing.

My own work, for instance, takes a similar tack as these authors, though focusing instead on the “essentially contested concept” of “secularism.” That is, in contrast to much contemporary scholarship, my research does not treat “secularism” as exclusively, or even principally, a second-order academic category—an imposed term art scholars deploy to name and describe what they regard as a connected set of ideological assumptions and aspirations that have, whether implicitly or explicitly, shaped Western “modernity.” Rather, I trace the polysemous, first-order uses of “secularism” in order to better understand what the term captured for different historical actors.

I explore in particular the dramatic shifts in the term’s conceptual contours between when it was first coined in 1851 and today. Whereas early conceptualizations of “secularism” principally referred to a *specific* ethical system and a mode of political participation first developed by British freethinker George Jacob Holyoake, the concept has since ballooned into a much broader umbrella category, used by scholars, theologians, and political commentators alike to collate a vast array of epistemological orientations, governmental structures, and church-state relations within which the nature and presence of religion is regulated. Documenting this shift in conceptualization, I argue, illuminates how historical actors dealt with changing social norms, ways of knowing, and ideas regarding the appropriate role of religion in public life.

Like Thomas and Gaston, my work is fundamentally shaped by the assumption that a focus on shifting conceptual terrains will offer innovative insights into historical questions of power, subject formation, and social change. And like Thomas and Gaston, I take those intellectuals who sought to fashion “secularism” into a second-order academic category not as neutral observers but as engaged participants in a complex and ongoing discursive exchange.

Imagining Judeo-Christian America and *Faking Liberties* therefore offer helpful templates, cautions, and conversation partners for my own research project. But even more significantly, these texts also demonstrate the possibilities—theoretical, methodological, and historiographical—that

Josephson-Storm's call for a more reflexive religious studies might bring to the historical study of American religion.

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