Chasing the Secular
Methodological Reflections on
How to Make the Secular Tangible

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**ABSTRACT:** How can we engage the secular in ways that encourage empirical investigations of its specific and embodied expressions? Locating the secular in particular places and situations invites the scholar to recognize it, to say “there it is.” However, the secular seems difficult to pin down precisely: it quickly expands into everything that is not considered religion in a given context, and the distinctively secular seems to evaporate into nothing. This article explores the slipperiness of the secular, not merely as a conceptual obstacle, but as something that emerges from the way the secular is fundamentally constituted upon the absence of religion rather than any specific forms of presence. It probes what kind of spatial, material, and embodied presence such absence of religion might have, and it suggests that an answer to this question may provide us with a methodological way out of the slipperiness.

**KEYWORDS:** academic practice, embodiment, materiality, secularity, sociology of religion

How can we think about the secular in ways that encourage empirical investigations of its specific, localized, material, and embodied expressions? Locating the secular in particular things, bodies, practices, and situations invites the scholar to say “there it is” or “here is something”; however, the secular seems indeed difficult to grasp. As Wendy Brown (2013: 4) has argued, the term in its everyday uses is immensely slippery and may variously designate a condition of being “unreligious or antireligious, but also religiously tolerant, humanist, Christian, modern, or simply Western. And any effort at settling the term immediately meets its doom in the conflicts among these associations.” The difficulty of discerning the secular was present and important already some 20 years ago in Talal Asad’s (2003) seminal invitation to trace the secular through its shadows, since it seemed to defy any direct gaze. It reverberates in Charles Hirschkind’s (2011: 634) metaphor of the secular as “the water we swim in,” being at the same time everywhere yet difficult to see, and it resonates in Matthew Engelke’s (2019: 200) poignant observation that the secular in scholarly investigations often seems to end up being “everything and nothing.” This is
both troublesome and intriguing, given that we as scholars most often would like to be able to say something intelligible—perhaps not about everything, but at least about something.

One way to read this slipperiness is to see it as an indication that scholars are in the process of unearthing a hegemonic cultural formation to which most of them (most of us?) belong. The slipperiness then testifies to the awkward process of denaturalizing the naturalized, creating a need for new conceptual handles. This, I think, is part of the conundrum. Another way to read the slipperiness is to ask what it tells us about the phenomena that we seek to grasp through the concept of the secular. One central feature of the term ‘secular’ is that it often attaches to styles of reasoning, modes of living, and forms of governance—certain forms of rationality, tolerance, religious pluralism, democratic governance, or scientific inquiry—that allegedly become possible only when religion has either disappeared or has become appropriately contained, separated from other spheres in life. So in some sense the quality that merits the labeling of something as secular is absence (of religion) rather than any clear or easily determinable features. As Hirschkind (2011) has argued, there seems to be an asymmetry in the distribution of substance between the two core concepts ‘religion’ and ‘secular’ in modern discourses that provides us with a wealth of specific, tangible examples when we try to imagine a religious life. The same specificity and tangibility do not as easily occur when we try to imagine a secular life. Offhand, a secular life would simply be any life, any thing, that is not marked as religious. And hence the slipperiness. Because if we continue down this road, a seemingly open-ended amount of things may in principle be secular—things that often seem better captured through other concepts.

In this article, I wish to stay with this interplay between presence and absence of religion as a productive site of specific forms of embodiment, affective engagements, and materiality. If we think about the secular as intrinsically a form of boundary work that continuously implies an active effort in order to make religion absent, then we might have a handle for locating the secular in specific practices, situations, things, and bodily dispositions. And we may start pondering about the kind of material presence this boundary work constitutes, thereby—hopefully—also making the secular more tangible for empirical investigations. This is not so much a way out of the conceptual slipperiness presented by Brown, but it might be a way of navigating it methodologically by providing a place to begin.

In order to get there, I want to think through three retrospective accounts from my own participation in and research into a self-declared secular discipline: the sociology of religion. This setting, as well as my immersion in it, is inescapably particular. As a field, it could be described in many different ways, but I will here approach it as an intersection between a specific field of academic practice with international scope (history and sociology of religion); a distinctively Danish university context, characterized by people with particular academic trajectories; and a Protestant/secular context characterized by a certain religious sobriety or even embarrassment. So there are no claims of empirical generality in the following accounts—that they are somehow representative of what the secular looks like. Rather, the aim is to start from a field of practice, probing what this field tells us about the location of the secular and the methodological challenges of making it tangible.

The first account is a sort of prelude. It revisits my early academic training in the 1990s when I was introduced to the ‘front stage’, if you will, of a particular version of secular boundary work. By ‘front stage’, I mean the stories we encountered about religion and the promises and possibilities that were predicated upon its separation from the scholarly endeavor. For example, the possibilities of being neutral, rational, and factual about religion, and not being captured by other problematic (i.e., irrational, subjective, affective) agenda, were all well-known tropes from studies into secular discourses and constitutive of the ideals of methodological agnosticism as
the appropriate approach to religion. What emerges from this account is a field highly geared toward making religion visible and discussing its forms and presence, while affirming the merits of keeping the scholarly space free of religion.

The second account is an interruption. It revisits an interview study I conducted in the early 2000s with Iraqi Shi’i Muslims, which in hindsight was an educational experience of how “our empirical material resists and speaks back to the conceptual work done to it”, as Andreas Bandak and Simon Stjernholm phrase it in the introduction to this collection of articles. However, at the time, it was quite an awkward affair. Awkward because the secular boundary work that I brought into the situation created confusion and poor rapport with my interlocutors. While this is surely a story about an unskilled researcher doing poor ethnography, the way it was poor—I believe—tells us something relevant, not only about the limitations of methodological agnosticism, but also about how the secular works. On the one hand, the foregrounding of religion as juxtaposed to the scholarly endeavors required investments in certain conceptual distinctions and an active cultivation of the body in order to maintain the boundary. On the other hand, these embodied aspects of the secular were simultaneously rendered invisible, which made it difficult to engage the absence of religion on the scholarly side of the boundary as anything more than the outcome of a disembodied scientific rationality.

This second aspect—the secular as a discourse of disembodiment that, as Webb Keane (2013: 164) has it, links “moral progress to practices of detachment from and reevaluation of materiality”—is by now well described. My aim, then, is to stay with detachment as a particular way of engaging the surroundings that is hence at the heart of the bodily labor that goes into making religion absent/present. So in the third and final account, I turn the predicament around and use it as an occasion for making the secular tangible. Here I revisit a recent field trip to a Pentecostal church in Copenhagen, exploring the practice of not raising one’s arms during a sermon as an example of secular embodiment, probing what kind of material presence the secular might have.

This article provides a story about foregrounds, failures, and flip sides evolving over time—about how the secular as embodied practice was largely invisible as long as religion was foregrounded, and how turning the tables and foregrounding the secular required a reconfiguration of my sense(s) of what being a scholar means. It is also, albeit more implicitly, a story about different disciplinary preferences and possibilities. It is not a coincidence, I guess, that the interest in the secular as a cultural formation did not emerge from the type of scholarship on religion described here, but rather from anthropology. But as I hope to show, it may provide a relevant ethnographic context for exploring how the secular takes place in bodies.

Drawing on autoethnographic accounts has its reasons as well as its weaknesses. The reasons are the following: first, it allows me to benefit from particular ‘revelatory moments’ (Trigger et al. 2012) that occurred during my academic training and in later years as a scholar. Of particular importance is a moment related to failure in my academic work—and failure in the academic field—that is, I think, most richly reached through autoethnography. In addition, an autoethnographic approach allows me to track a specific academic development over a period of 15 years, which I would not have been able to do otherwise. The weaknesses are obvious: autoethnographic accounts are always retrospective and selective (Ellis et al. 2011), blurring the lines between scholar and object, research and confession, making the accounts vulnerable to critiques regarding factual accurateness and scope. After all, an autoethnographic account is the story of only one interlocutor, and an interlocutor with a very specific interest. To be sure, the description below about my academic training is inflected by my later fieldwork in two Danish departments for the study of religion, undertaken as part of my PhD on secular boundary work and academic practice, which again forms the backdrop of the way I engage the reflections presented in this
article. So the temporality is indeed complicated, and the accounts are haunted by a certain dramatic irony. However, the aim is not to produce a description as I would have when I was a student. The aim is to produce an account that—given what I know today—serves the purpose of telling something true about the topic at hand.

**Genealogies and Conversations**

Raising questions about how to make the secular tangible is obviously not my invention. They are part of an ongoing scholarly conversation that has emerged and diversified during the last two decades, not least spurred by Talal Asad’s (2000, 2003) seminal work on the secular as a cultural grammar that underpins any formulations of secularism as a political doctrine. Asad’s work has been immensely productive, stimulating continuous reflections on the secular as the implicit condition of possibility for articulating and experiencing religion as a distinct sphere to be regulated, respected, tolerated, or investigated (as in the accounts below). Still, there is work to be done on the secular, both empirically and methodologically. Even though the last couple of years have provided some empirical studies of forms of life that might, under one definition or the other, qualify as secular, I still think that Matthew Engelke (2014: S300) has a point when he ponders the fact that “we have numerous genealogical and intellectual-historical accounts of how religion became belief after the Enlightenment but surprisingly few case studies of how enlightenment gets lived beyond its imagining.” What runs through quite a lot of the empirical and ethnographic work following Asad is the tying of the formations of the secular to Western colonialism (internal and external) and its distribution of concepts, forms of domination, and styles of governance to the rest of the world under the pretext of their universality. There was—and is—in Asad’s work an invitation to interrupt secular political narratives of religious toleration, religious freedom, public reason, and democracy, and this invitation has been especially appealing to scholars working on Islam and Muslims, whether in the Arab world (e.g., Agrama 2012; Mahmood 2005, 2015) or in a European context (e.g., Amir-Moazami 2014; Bracke and Fadil 2008; Burchardt and Griera 2019; Fernando 2014; Johansen and Spielhaus 2019; Selby 2012).

I think there are key insights to be found in studies that emphasize the political and regulatory aspects of the secular, and how its shifting configurations of power have been and still are part of larger geopolitical as well as racialized and gendered formations. However, in these works the secular mainly figures as a context of political suspicion and problematic interventions into the lived lives of particular people, rather than as the life-world of particular people. But we should also be curious about the inhabitability of the secular, something that comes across in rich details, for example, in Matthew Engelke’s (2014) and Katie Aston’s (2015) studies of British humanists, Lois Lee’s (2015) work on non-religious ways of life, David Thurfjell’s (2015) studies of secular/post-Christian Swedes (see also Thurfjell et al. 2019), and Donovan Schaefer’s (2022) work on early modern scientists. What these studies show are forms of life that emerge in and from a secular grammar, molding it into meaningful stories of the world and the possibility for living in it. The reflections presented below should be read as a contribution mainly to the latter line of thinking in the sense that it approaches the secular not just as a hegemonic political formation, which may restrain the scholarly engagement with religious realities, but as something that also makes sense to specific people in specific contexts, such as academic life. It is never completely detached from political projects of governing religion, nor is it completely subsumed under them.

Within the post-Asadian conversations on the secular, pondering issues of embodiment, emotions, and practice is one way of engaging the question of tangibility (Gilger 2018;
Hirschkind 2011; Scheer, Johansen, and Fadil 2019; Scheve et al. 2019). An important starting point for exploring these matters has obviously been Charles Hirschkind’s (2011) influential article, where he raises the question of whether there is a secular body. Hirschkind ends up answering in the negative, and in so doing he provides one of the most poignant formulations of the predicament of grasping the secular: “Each time we attempt to characterize a secular subject in terms of a determinant set of embodied dispositions, we lose a sense of what secular refers to” (ibid.: 641). The difficulty seems to arise with the very attempt at making determinate something that is defined by an absence—just as the term ‘non-alcoholic’ says nothing substantial about a beverage besides its lack of alcohol. The very act of determination would make the distinctively secular evaporate, namely its generative negative relationship with something almost as unstable (religion) that is there (but not here). In Scheer, Fadil, and Johansen’s (2019) Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions, a more recent attempt to take up Hirschkind’s question and answer it in the plural rather than in the negative, the co-editors and all the contributing authors might have succeeded in documenting that there are indeed many different types of bodies that in certain situations and upon certain understandings can intelligibly be understood as secular. But admittedly, the question of the tangibility (materially, bodily) of something distinctly secular still somehow wavers, and so we are left with the methodologically unsatisfying answer of the secular potentially being ‘everything and nothing’, as Matthew Engelke states in his afterword to the book. This is where I want to pick up the conversation, hopefully showing one possible way of grasping the secular as a certain type of something that needs to be taught and trained in order to sustain itself.

Prelude: Studying Religion

What I want to do now is to take a step back in time and sideways in style and revisit my own academic training into a self-declared secular discipline as an example of secular boundary work. This serves as a starting point for the subsequent reflections on the difficulties and possibilities of grasping the secular. Through my studies, I had been introduced to many different and sometimes competing scholarly understandings of religion: historical, sociological, phenomenological, theological, and so on. I was well acquainted with the debates between supporters of functionalist and substantive definitions (often anchored in a distinction between Tylor and Durkheim), but I also understood that at the end of the day scholars would never agree about a final definition. At the same time, there were still preferences for and detachments from particular styles of doing research, and I learned about the theological roots of the study of religion and the important but also potentially compromising theological conceptions of religion ingrained in the writings of the early comparative phenomenologists (e.g., in the work of Eliade and van der Leeuw), which were potentially compromising because such a project could skew the scholar’s ability to study especially non-Christian religions on their own premises. So we were trained to be cautious about implicitly Protestant conceptions of religion because they tended to emphasize (1) the personal, the inner, the deeply held at the expense of the social, communal, and institutional aspects of religion, and (2) the dogmatic, the scriptural, and the intellectual over the ritual, practical, and embodied aspects of religion.

We were also trained to leave out of the equation any questions about the possible truth of the beliefs and experiences of the people we studied, in other words, to ‘bracket the truth claims’ and remain methodologically agnostic or neutral with regard to the status of the religious realities people were living. So the question “Is this true?” was presented as irrelevant for the scholarly enterprise; rather, the appropriate focus would be to explain what people had actually said
and done—and why. As I have discussed elsewhere (Johansen 2014), the ongoing production of such distinctions between different types of truths, privileging some as ‘what people actually said and did’ (empirical truths) and some as scholarly interpretations (scholarly truths), while others can be bracketed and hence particularized as beliefs, cultural ideas, worldviews, or truth claims—is an intrinsic activity in much of the empirical social sciences. But it takes a distinct and intensified form in methodological agnosticism because there is a lot at stake: the very boundary between science and religion. On a more suspicious reading, this idea of bracketing truth claims stands in some tension with the idea of the scholar trying to reach religion on its own premises—premises that would typically not accept reality being reduced to truth claims. John Milbank (1991) succinctly raised this critique of secular social science from the position of a theological obligation on the message of Christ: if the truth is the truth, it must be reckoned with as such by the scholar. The moment you bracket it, you have effectively undone it. Later critiques of methodological agnosticism and its inherent reductionism, emerging especially within anthropology, also seem driven by a sense of ontological loss concerning religious reality, for example, that methodological agnosticism will tend to approach religious beliefs and practices as a metaphor for something else—say, communal joy, the forging of social ties, or the satisfaction of certain psychological needs—rather than as a metonymical instantiation of some larger whole (Knibbe and Droogers 2011). Or that it reduces to epistemological differences what should more readily be engaged as ontological differences between the worlds that human beings create and inhabit (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 5). So while the anthropological and theological critiques might differ regarding their view on reality/truth as singular or multiple respectively, they do share a dissatisfaction with the containment of religious life within the immanent frame that fences off the scholar from the reality/truth of what is studied.

But the flaws and fate of methodological agnosticism are actually a sidetrack here. Or rather, what I want to do is to engage this ‘fencing off’ as something that is taught and trained as part of a certain scholarly ethos. This ethos was sometimes made explicit through demands of neutrality, but more often it was subtly communicated by employing particular spatial and sensorial metaphors (e.g., being ‘distant’, ‘external’, ‘outside’, and ‘untouched’) that contributed to the crafting of a boundary between the scholar and her object in a way that made difficult any possible shared or overlapping grounds, points of mutual learning, or porosity between different fields (Johansen 2011). I think there was a certain scholarly pride surrounding this approach to religion; it was seen as open-minded, critical, and, to some extent, ethically favorable. It was viewed as ethically favorable in part because the scientific investigations that were made possible by the absence of religion offered to counter widely held prejudices about religious Others. Such prejudices were found not least among the mainstream majoritarian Protestant Christians, who insisted on privileging Christianity as ‘normal’ religion vis-à-vis religious minorities, ‘cults’, or ‘sects’.1 As such, there was an implicit presence of and invitation to deepen a commitment to equality and a non-judgmental attitude to religion—something that points toward the strong moral commitment ingrained in secular (and liberal) narratives.2 The scholarly insight was (and remains) that Christianity is but one instance of the category ‘religion’—no more, no less. And even though this category is shaped in a Christian tradition, purging it from its Christian specificities has always been considered important for the forging of concepts that can be meaningfully applied to other traditions. Thus, the category of religion here largely worked to transcend difference and particularize Protestant Christianity with the aim of facilitating epistemic equality: all religions are in principle equally suitable for scholarly investigation. The category of religion did not—as Robert Orsi (2005) and Russell McCutcheon (2003) have convincingly described for certain forms of US scholarship on religion—provide a gateway for universalizing a particular form of Protestant Christianity as the paradigmatic instantiation of ‘good’ religion.
Even though the disembodiment and desensualization of knowledge was quite evident here (with bodies and sensibilities belonging largely to the subjective domains, e.g., religion), certain kinds of bodily engagement were still considered part of this ‘front stage’, even though they were not directly articulated. The particular emplotment of the academic endeavor—the methodological agnosticism, the project of epistemic equality, and the possibility to counter prejudice—created streams of enthusiasm that were easy to access and motivating to follow (for most, but not all, students). And the drawing of a boundary between religion and, in this context, the academic enterprise opened a meaningful identity for us—perhaps akin to what Levine (2011) has called the ‘joy of secularism’—just as it deepened a particular understanding of the university as an institution distinct and separate from other spheres and institutions (e.g., the church, the parliament, the court). From such ‘front stages’ we might start an investigation into secular life, identifying sites or situations where the boundary work becomes explicit. We can explore how the boundaries are crafted narratively and sustained in practice, and we may probe the understandings of religion that they implicate. In this specific example, there were many different understandings available, but there was a certain gravity around religion as associated with the transempirical or that which cannot be known, contrasted to the scholarly obligation vis-à-vis the knowable. But there was more going on than what appears on the ‘front stage’.

**Interruptions: Being Caught in the Secular**

It is interesting how a Protestant emphasis on the textual, the intellectual, and the individualized strivings at the expense of the practical, embodied, and communal, which we as students learned to criticize with regard to religion, in an odd way replicated itself in modern academic inattentiveness to its own embodied practices and emotional labor (Bondi 2005). Such an observation runs parallel with Birgit Meyer’s (2010) point about the continuities between Protestant ignorance of its own aesthetics and sensorial forms and the academic neglect of the aesthetic, material, and sensorial aspects of religion. However, the aim is not to continue the pun about continuities between secular and Protestant grammars, but rather to pursue the bodily work that did in fact take place in this particular setting of secular boundary work, which was much more pervasive than the ‘front stage’ enthusiasm reveals. I shift to my second example and revisit a partly failed interview study I conducted in 2004 as part of my master’s thesis. Failures in academic work can indeed be ‘revelatory moments’ regarding the field of study, and what was revealed through this particular failure eventually turned out to be the bodily and emotional labor that went into making religion absent on the scholarly side of the fence, which had been largely invisible to me during my studies.

At that time, public debates in Denmark were still shaped by the repercussions of 9/11. The media were filled with statements about the problematic ‘expansive’ religiosity of Muslims—a religiosity that apparently did not conform to fundamental secular demands, such as separating religion from politics, legislation, and the public sphere more generally. I was struck—as were many others at that time—by the extreme lack of ‘Muslim voices’ in these debates and the extremely narrow framework for participation. When Muslims were engaged in interviews, they were always called upon to voice their democratic allegiance and to reassure the worried public about their ability to separate Islam from their political lives as citizens. The question that emerged for me was twofold. What was religion, in this case Islam, considered to be, since it was so important to separate it from other spheres in society, such as politics and law? And what was Islam considered to be by the people who embraced their lives as Muslims? So I conducted an interview study with Shi’i Muslims living in Denmark, who had an Iraqi background, about their life with and perceptions of Islam. This was completely in line with the style of research I
had been taught: the curious, empirically grounded, and non-judgmental study of people’s lifeworlds, seeking to provide knowledge on an issue located at a conflictual intersection between majoritarian and minoritarian understandings of religion.

However, the study was rife with awkwardness and misunderstandings, of which I will highlight only one. When opening the interviews, I explained that I was interested in learning about Islam from their perspective. There were no right or wrong answers—I wanted to learn what Islam was for them. These openings reflected the ethos of neutrality and were meant to create a comfortable and secure atmosphere for the interview. But after the first couple of interviews, I realized that this was not the result. Instead, the openings created discomfort and confusion: what did I mean by ‘their perspective’ and ‘for them’? Islam was not intuitively understandable as something ‘for them’. Islam was a complicated reality, rife with right and wrong answers, and they would be happy to refer me to someone with more expertise. It is not uncommon that scholars (of religion or otherwise) need to reassure their interlocutors that they have something important to convey. However, despite my continuous attempts to explain that it was their life with and their perspective on this complex reality that interested me, they clearly navigated in a field of authoritative knowledge and facts when attempting to answer my questions. So I continuously had the feeling that I was trying to conduct interviews with people about their experience of living with, say, biochemistry—yet insisting that ‘there are no right or wrong answers’. Consequently, a lot of our conversations developed around my interlocutors’ way of incorporating expert advice in their lives, evidencing the intelligibility of this advice. They would frequently make parallels to a doctor when explaining the role of the imam, or would refer to him as a “scientist on Islam.”

Clearly, there was no common ground with regard to the underlying conception of religion. Actually, I created additional confusion by framing Islam as a matter of religion, while they consistently used the word *din* as a translation for ‘religion’, but would use it for specific creeds, ritual guidelines, and judgments on moral issues. Islam was much more than merely religion. Had I at the time been more well rehearsed in the literature on modern Islam, processes of religious objectivation, or even genealogical studies of the concept of religion, I might have been better prepared for the clash of habitus that took place. In any case, the awkwardness returned me to my own implicit presuppositions: that religion had to do with all the considerations, beliefs, and ethical concerns that lie outside or beyond the sphere constituted by publicly authorized knowledge, which I inhabited through my ‘scientific’ and ‘non-discriminating’ approach to them and to Islam. So while I had learned to be skeptical toward implicit Protestant conceptions of religion (I asked a lot of questions about practices!), anyone acquainted with Asad’s work on religion would recognize the privatizing and subjectivizing grammar at work. Consequently, my search for material for the analysis became directed at their experiences, their practices, their beliefs as gateways to gain knowledge about Islam. But it was exactly this implicit subjectivism ascribed to Islam that they rejected, just as they rejected my related and largely implicit distinction between the religious and the scientific. And in no way did my methodological agnosticism, my self-perceived neutrality toward their religious ‘truths claims’ help me engage their religious life on ‘their premises’. Because taking these premises seriously would imply a dissolving of the ontological position from which I approached them. Indeed, I was mistaking ontological differences for epistemic ones.

So even though the awkwardness spoke directly to my research question about the potentially conflicting meeting between different conceptions of religion—the conflict was going on right there, in the interview and in me—I largely ignored it in my thinking and writing, just as I ignored my interlocutors’ frustrations in attempting to explain things to me. Because being neutral meant not being moved, or not letting feelings influence the analytical process. What was allowed to pass as ‘empirical stuff’ for my analysis was only their words and reactions, not any of the rather
pressing affective intensities that emerged from and suffused our frictional encounter. The promise ingrained in the scholarly identity I had acquired was that it supposedly would allow me to ‘see’ religion properly, without distortions. The awkwardness in the situation emerged, among other things, from the fact that this did not happen, which I clearly felt. Because I habitually processed the tension as distortion rather than as a tension pregnant with meaning, I discarded it in order to keep the air clear and transparent. And in doing so, I also cut off or shut down certain connections that were otherwise in the making between me and my interlocutors.\(^3\)

Looking back at this experience, what slowly came into shape was the deeply embodied experience of upholding the boundary. How it made me sort through the different types of knowledge pressing against me in a particular and systematic way, for example, ignoring my own affective arousals and cutting off all connections with my interlocutors other than the transmission of semantic meaning. How physically demanding it was (I used words, my voice, and facial expressions to tame or curb my confusion and uncertainty), and at the same time how completely invisible it was. Now, I suppose that all activities have implicit, habituated aspects that are largely invisible for those performing the activities, but it is also quite telling how the invisibility here mirrored the exclusion of the body of the scholar in the foregrounded narratives of the secular scientific endeavor. So let us now focus on this effort of negation as an intrinsic aspect of how the secular works.

**Engaging the Secular**

Much scholarly attention has been given to the ways in which the immaterial can be made present or proximate, for example, through particular ritual practices, through certain material and sensational forms, or through communal activities (Bandak 2017; Brahinsky 2012; Buchli 2010; Luhrmann 2004; Meyer 2010; Orsi 2005). What the second account above suggests is that secular boundary work requires an active effort in order to make certain things absent. That is, it requires a purposeful negation of shared affectedness and ontological plurality in order for religion to become absent on one side of the boundary, while being present on the other. In my third and final example, I will analyze this active negation as an important aspect of the embodiment of secular boundary work, considering how we may think of it in ways that avoid falling into the ‘everything and nothing’ trap.

A couple of years ago, I participated in a Pentecostal Sunday sermon in the North West Block of Copenhagen. It took place in a church whose monthly mega-sermons are widely attended by immigrants, principally from Thailand, Ghana, and various parts of Latin America. The church is part of a cultural center that also provides different forms of schooling and space for local community activities. I participated with a dozen students, mainly from the US and Europe, and besides observation, our academic focus was on how the church engaged its role as a mediator between different immigrant groups and different forms of Christianity. We were assigned seats in a row at the back of a large, relatively dark room. A stage and a screen were at the front of the room, which looked like a cinema, concert venue, or theater with colored spotlights and microphones. As the sermon began, we were taken through different actions and different atmospheres, sometimes sitting down and listening to preaching, sometimes standing up and being blessed with our heads bowed, sometimes singing. There was a band playing, and the intensity of the music and the pop concert style performance were sufficiently recognizable and accessible to enable us to join in the clapping and move to the music. For my part, I felt curious and invigorated by the joyful atmosphere. Then, at a certain moment, the lead singer raised both of her arms in the air and simultaneously lifted her head slightly to look upward—and everyone
followed her. Raising the arms in this kind of “signature Charismatic worship” (Brahinsky 2012: 215) was obviously expected, yet I did not (would not?) do it. And as I looked sideways, I realized that none of us were raising our hands. Perhaps if people had been swinging their arms in parallel movements from side to side, and if their gazes had been directed at the singer, not the ceiling, the concert atmosphere might have been sufficiently strong enough for us to go along. But we just stood there, in a row, not raising our arms. How to make sense of this?

When I talked to the students afterward about why they had not raised their arms, the answers were vague. One student said that it was simply “too much.” Another said that she did not want to be insincere—that raising her arms while “not believing in it” would somehow make a mockery of the genuine members of the congregation—a Protestant/secular trope well described by Ashton (2019). My own subsequent reflection on why I had not moved my arms went something along these lines. Standing up, singing, and even bowing one’s head in (performed) prayer was not ‘too much.’ They were habituated Lutheran practices that I could entertain without having to consider whether I was being sincere. They could all make the ‘maybe it’s religion, maybe it’s culture, maybe I don’t have to pause and think about it’ threshold. But raising one’s arms marked a border that could not be passed without embarrassment, moral as well as ontological. There might definitely also have been a component of what Josh Brahinsky (2012: 231), in his article on ‘Pentecostal body logics,’ calls the “modern concerns regarding the allure of somatic collectivity.” That is, it was a moment of us saying ‘no’ to the potential collective forces emerging around us. In any case, keeping our arms down was not random, but rather a direct response to the raised arms around us, which in the moment effectively marked a cutting off or shutting down of our participation in the presence of the Holy Spirit that was unfolding around us.

Here I want to return to Charles Hirschkind’s (2011) reflections on the secular body and the question of (in)determinacy as part of what makes the secular difficult to grasp. As mentioned earlier, Hirschkind explains how the very act of trying to tie the secular to a determinant set of embodied dispositions would make the distinctly secular—the generative negative relationship with religion—disappear. But maybe it is possible to grasp the material presence of this relational negation of religion if we think differently about what ‘determinate presence’ might mean. To be sure, if by determinate embodied dispositions we mean a kind of presence that complies with what Bruno Latour (1987: 237) calls “immutable mobiles” (i.e., clearly delineated objects, or, in the case of the body, postures, styles of movement, scripted emotional comportment, the presence of which in terms of the space they occupy remains largely the same, and which can be moved across contexts without losing their form), then the secular is indeed impossible to determine. If one tries to do so, an almost endless field of possible secular presences opens up (the secular is everything that is not marked as religion), and the specificity of the secular escapes us (the secular is nothing). Surely, much of what is recognized as material for a study of religion by scholars has a presence that is more approximate to this type of materiality: a specific style of kneeling distinctly recognizable as part of Islamic prayer across contexts, a certain way of raising the arms as signature charismatic worship, particular symbols encoded as belonging to a particular religious tradition (even when they are recycled or reinterpreted), certain texts that makes gods present and transportable, and so forth. But this is not the only way to think about material presence.

During the Pentecostal sermon, it was not our posture (standing with our arms down) in and of itself that was secular; rather, the secularity of the act revealed itself as part of an assemblage—the entire situation with all the generative connections and disconnections between actors present in the room. Not raising one’s arms can mean many different things. Doing so in another context, say a neo-Nazi gathering, obviously points to something very different. So not raising arms cannot be decontextualized and moved and still retain its specificity as secular,
but that does not make it any less material or determinable. It just requires a specific condition for it to ignite and a particular kind of juxtaposed material—religion—that it can feed on. At the sermon, the specific moment of ignited negation fed on particular embodied notions of non-Protestant forms of religiosity as ‘very religious’, for example, by implying bodily expressions beyond standing, sitting, and singing. If we instead consider a presence of the secular that is understood through metaphors of fire rather than as immutable mobiles, we might perhaps be better helped. ‘Fire objects’ is a concept introduced by John Law and Vicky Singleton (2005) as a way to grasp the kind of material presences that live by means of a generative relationship with something else, typically more solid or immutable forms of materiality, which they cannot exist without. As flames, they are unstable and shift in magnitude. They are discernable as much through their effects (the heat, the way they alter other types of material) as through the part that can be seen—and often, especially if there are other bright lights, you cannot see them at all. Fire objects can feed on many different kinds of material, and you cannot necessarily predict where they will emerge, making them difficult to study. Yet they are as material as any other objects, and if they are not determinate, they are at least temporarily determinable.

Approaching the material and embodied presence of the secular in this way—as boundary work that, among other things, reveals itself through the embodied dispositions of negation of/disconnection to religion, and that therefore necessarily lives through a generative relationship with specific understandings of religion—could perhaps remedy some of the slipperiness of the secular. Because not everything that is not marked as religion has this property at any given time; nor is it nothing. True, such an approach will tend to begin investigations in situations of heightened and hence visible boundary activity, but this is not where the investigations should stop. To illustrate this point, the articulated emplotment of the scholarly enterprise in the first account was easy to access for us students because it tapped into and deepened already existing folds in the social and bodily fabric, which most of us had rehearsed in numerous settings. From kindergarten training of respect for others’ bodily and emotional integrity, over years of schooling into the separation of particular subjects, hours and hours of training in certain forms of intellectual attention filled with words and argumentation (not bodies), endless emotional training (not least through popular cultural products) of recognizing and responding to particular forms of injustice—and on and on. As such, the academic discourses of separating religion from scholarly endeavors emerged as meaningful only in relation to the backdrop of already disciplined mindful bodies that had been trained to recognize and respond with negation to things ‘very religious’. Tracing such threads that connect the sites of explicit boundary work with other sites, where the occupation with something understood as religion is either absent or only remotely identifiable somewhere on the horizon, would be an indispensable further step in exploring both the reproduction and dissolving of ‘flammable’ sites.

Remainder

A central part of what I am doing in this article is to explore the shifting borders between scholar and object, turning my scholarly experiences into material for a study about how to think through possible ways of grasping the secular. If I flip the chart one last time and ponder the methodological implications of not raising one’s arms as a scholar of religion in the field, I am of course wondering what might have happened if I had gone along and lifted them. Would I have been taken into the domains of bodily surprises so vividly described by Brahinsky (even though he did in fact not raise his arms)? Or would that require far more sensorial training? Would I have been able to enter the field of serious playfulness suggested by Knibbe
and Droogers and learn something else or something more about, say, the communal joy of Pentecostal Christianity, about the communicative potentials of bodily movements, or about the presence of whatever it is that was present there, between us in the room and beyond? Perhaps. Or I might have been thrown back into my embodied dispositions, standing with my arms up in the air, feeling ridiculous, exposed as an imposter (but equally vividly experiencing my secular embarrassment). In any case, just as I would no longer see the latter as a methodological failure but as a revelatory moment of secular habituation, I can no longer ignore the negating and disconnecting mechanisms that forge the sense of absence, cleanse the air, and maintain the distance under the pretext of being neutral. That moment is indeed lost.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank the Symposium editors, Andreas Bandak and Simon Stjernholm, for their helpful comments while this article was being written. I also extend thanks to the participants in the “Engaging Religion” workshops and to the anonymous reviewers.

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**NOTES**

1. For an exemplary study on this topic, see Eileen Barker’s (1984) *The Making of a Moonie* about the Unification Church.
2. See Keane (2007) for the longer historical trajectories of such narratives.
3. A short note on discipline. I think it makes a difference whether you are taught that the space that emerges through a suspension of judgment is an open, creative space that potentially changes you, or whether this space is conceptualized as neutral, as a safeguard against (religious) subjectivism that at the same time allows you to access the religious lives of others. Different types of scholarship might imply different dramatizations of the secular.
4. In fact, not raising one’s arms is recounted by others doing fieldwork in Pentecostal settings. See, for example, Brahinsky (2012: 216).
REFERENCES


