ABSTRACT: This article outlines a conceptual dyad that maps onto a widespread pre-occupation with the untangling and elimination of religious traces among avowedly nonreligious people: clarification and disposal. Clarification denotes the reworking of morality, ceremonial conduct, and artistic expression as endeavors that are essentially human or cultural and therefore only incidental to religious traditions. Disposal refers to practices that aim to remove that which is deemed religious and irrational. We suggest that dilemmas of clarification and disposal are felt by all self-consciously nonreligious people. Combining ethnographic research in India and a comparative engagement with findings from elsewhere, the article also demonstrates how clarification and disposal offer a corrective contribution to analytical languages in the study of nonreligion.

KEYWORDS: atheism, embodiment, humanism, materiality, nonreligion, secularity

The anthropological study of nonreligious social phenomena is underdeveloped but, in the past decade, the contours of this emergent subject area have boldened to the point that it is now possible to call it something more than simply a “hypothetical” anthropology of nonreligion (Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015: 2). The breadth of novel and related projects is striking: it includes research on organized rationalism in India (Quack 2012), irreligiosity in post-revolutionary Tunisia (Ben Slima 2019), atheists amidst Islamic revivalist movements in Egypt (Schiellek 2012), secular humanist campaigns in Britain (Engelke 2014), the lasting legacies of political atheism from Angola (Blanes and Paxe 2015) to Kyrgyzstan (Louw 2020), and close attention to more ordinary forms of indifference to religion, faith, and belief (Quack and Schuh 2017). In these and other contexts, anthropologists have not only attended to the multitude of ways that people seek to attenuate, critique, or altogether dispose of religious connections, but also the attempts they make to invent or recover novel foundations for morality, ceremony, and sociality. Although these case studies have modern contexts in common, this is not because something called ‘modernity’ uniquely allows for the “possibility of leaving religion by the wayside” (Bialecki 2017: 194), since departures and removals of this kind are not essentially modern. In cultural forms ranging from divinicide to disbelief, we find what appear to be perennial human experiences and projects, including the exposure of frauds, the disavowal of deities, doubt in spiritual demands, and the interrogation of orthodox hierarchies. We find, in other words, a resolutely anthropological subject matter that addresses elementary questions and topics, such as solidarity, social reproduction, resistance, and authority. In light of the considerable growth of original research, and because this catalogue of case studies is on the preci-
pice of further expansion, it is timely and necessary to develop further systematic contributions, a project this article aims to contribute to.

Earlier anthropological work did not ignore questions of non-religiosity—consider Paul Radin’s call for “due and proper regard for the activities of the nonreligious individual” (Radin 1953: 103), or anthropologists like Mary Douglas and Jack Goody, who either pursued piecemeal research on radical skepticism and religious disavowal (Goody and Watt 1963; Goody 1996), or strongly criticized anthropology’s lack of a sustained focus on matters of non-belief and doubt (e.g., Douglas [1970] 1996: 18). Many others could be named, but these anthropologists did not see themselves as advancing discussions on these topics as part of a distinct comparative project. These earlier works contain much of value, and the recuperation of their insights is both overdue and a necessary move for a more self-conscious anthropology of nonreligion.

The introduction to this special section proposes that focus on the “lived, embodied, situated, or everyday forms of nonreligion” (Schulz and Binder) promises to emancipate the anthropology of nonreligion from its “late arrival.” We suggest that the generation of conceptual equipment by and for such an anthropology is equally important for achieving such an aim. Here we introduce a conceptual pair—clarification and disposal—and seek to elucidate their value for comparative work in the anthropology of nonreligion. We might describe them as critical secular methods for the production of self-consistent secular lives. There is a deceptive simplicity to them; the actively nonreligious protagonist scans cultural life and, having detected traces of religious contamination, asks: Which aspects of culture can be clarified as having an essentially human or cultural basis that is independent of religious premises and—relatedly—which aspects of culture should be disposed of, given their perceived superstitious or mystical significance and potentially harmful social influence? We suggest that the concepts capture dynamics and dilemmas internal to nonreligious organizations, movements, and publics across space and time. The parameters of clarification and disposal are not set. If secular humanism is a kind of “socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute [it as a] tradition” (MacIntyre 1981: 222), then dilemmas about clarification and disposal form precisely the stuff of that argument. As such they recur across a range of nonreligious contexts.

While the conceptual pair should not be interpreted as ready-made conclusions and their relevance for the anthropology of nonreligion will obviously vary, it is important to note that we derive the two concepts from ethnographic materials as well as the history of anthropology. Unpacking them as critical secular methods is important for ethnographic reasons, but their elaboration also allows us to challenge unexamined assumptions at work in the anthropology of secularism; in particular, the assumption that the secular is unthought and untaught. Famously, the starting point for Talal Asad was that secularity has a “self-evident character,” since it “is so much part of our modern life, it is not easy to grasp it directly. I think it is best pursued through its shadows” (Asad 2003: 16). This foundational premise resounds throughout many works in the anthropology of secularism today. We argue, instead, that the secular is very much explicitly taught and thought, as an epistemic category and a discursive space that is arbitrated and policed through practices of clarification and disposal. However, this argument should not be misconstrued as a reduction of nonreligion to cognitive abstractions removed from the “fuzzy” exigencies of everyday ethics and lived, ordinary conduct. Rather, central to our argument—and congruent with the focus of the introduction to this special issue on the grounded aspects of nonreligion—is that clarification and disposal are variously material and embodied aspects of teaching and thinking: the “articulated convictions” (Schulz 2020) of secularism emerge dialectically with material practices of clarification that inform those articulations. The introduction places emphasis on studying nonreligion as a situated practice. This article argues that a pre-
requisite for studying nonreligion as a situated practice is to cease to assume that the secular is untaught and unthought.

We begin by expanding Matthew Engelke’s suggestion that organized humanism constitutes a “project of clarification” (Engelke 2014: 300), demonstrating how this conception maps onto ideas and practices that are central not only to organized humanism in the United Kingdom, but to multiple atheist and rationalist movements elsewhere in the world. In the second part of the article, we turn to consider a complementary concept of a humanist ‘project of disposal’ and its analytical implications for the anthropological study of nonreligious social formations.

Clarification

Engelke describes organized humanism as a “project of clarification of the insisted on difference between what is cultural (religious belief) and natural (certain modes of sociality)” (Engelke 2014: 300); that is to say, the British humanists studied by Engelke disparage some aspects of religion, such as illogical propositional assents (‘beliefs’), but they also find other aspects redeemable. For example, although life-cycle ceremonies are often considered—by both academics and popular commentators—to be inseparable from the “routine, discipline, and authority associated with religion” (Engelke 2015a: 217), organized humanism clarifies these practices, reframing them as essentially natural and human. Accordingly, nonreligious ceremonies have been developed to mark especially meaningful or momentous occasions such as namings, weddings, and funerals (e.g., Aston 2019; Engelke 2015a). In short, humanists in Britain and elsewhere approach religion as an ambiguous repository of human goods. We suggest that by developing Engelke’s approach to organized humanism in relation to the history of anthropology and present-day analytical arguments, we can demonstrate how the concept of clarification becomes useful for the study of not just this nonreligious formation but also related or similar formations elsewhere.

A prevalent argument in the study of nonreligion maintains that a primary aspect of many humanist groups is “not how they ‘differ’ from religion but how they ‘mirror’ religious offers” (Quack 2014: 447). These groups are represented as providers of “functional equivalents to religious worldviews and life-cycle rituals” (ibid.: 451). Lois Lee, for instance, suggests that organized humanism “present[s] ritual services not only in contradistinction from religious ones but also drawing on the languages and content of religious models [and, as such] they may be seen to have religious dimensions” (Lee 2015: 35; for a historical analysis of nineteenth-century French atheists that is analogous to this approach, see Hecht 1997). This mode of interpretation and representation draws out and emphasizes the ways nonreligion relates to, and in some cases reproduces, religious forms and ideas. We agree that there are important ways in which humanists define themselves and their projects (and enact them, too) in relation to what they reject. At the same time, we consider it necessary to take seriously the claims organized humanism makes for itself—for instance, about its detachment from religious modalities—and thus to explore internal dimensions that may be irreducible to its relation to religion (see also Binder 2020; Farman 2020). In the context of organized humanism in the UK, humanist celebrants, and humanists more generally, do not describe the ceremonies they provide as rituals adopted from religion. To seek to clarify ritual behavior as an essentially human activity expresses sensibilities and intentions that have more in common with verbs such as to correct, rather than to mirror, copy or emulate. Clarification is not imitation.

But if humanist ceremonies are not functional equivalents modeled on religious offers, where does the logic of clarificatory projects come from? Engelke does not address this question. Sim-
ilarly, in her research on organized humanism in Sweden, Susanne Kind notes: “Proponents of humanist ceremonies argue that rituals are as old as mankind itself and that most of the respective events were celebrated even before Christian churches declared them important life events” (Kind 2020: 59), but she does not source these arguments to any body of knowledge. Let us consider how some humanist arguments for the clarification of ritual conduct can borrow very substantially from the discipline of anthropology. Stephen Law, a popular humanist philosopher, starts his discussion about the significance of humanist life-cycle ceremonies by introducing Ludwig Wittgenstein’s critique of James George Frazer. In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer argued that “savage peoples” practice ritual magic according to the “Law of Similarity” (Frazer [1890] 1925: 10–11). This law is founded on one of the chief principles of magic: that “like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause” (ibid.: 11). Thus, when a “tribesman . . . pushes a knife into an effigy,” he believes that this act will inflict harm on his foe (Law 2011: 135). In this example, the effigy is not representational. Instead, the relation between the hated enemy and the effigy is assimilative, such that the tribesman “infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it” (Frazer [1980] 1925: 11).

Law restates Wittgenstein’s critique: if this hypothetical tribesman truly believes that carved effigies can affect the world, why does his conduct not reflect this belief? The point being made is straightforward: the same tribesman who “apparently in order to kill his enemy, sticks a knife through a picture of him, really does build his hut of wood and cuts his arrow with skill and not in effigy” (Wittgenstein 1987: 4). In other words, the Law of Similarity cannot explain the role of effigies and there must be some other motivation behind this practice: “According to Wittgenstein, this kind of ritualistic behaviour is not primitive, but . . . part of our human nature” (Law 2011: 136). This point is especially important—consider an excerpt from Law’s text: “It is, to some extent, something we all engage in. We kiss images of ones we love, for example, or angrily tear up photos of those we hate. We touch wood for luck. Even atheist footballers look to the heavens and raise their arms imploringly when they miss a penalty. Why?” (ibid.: 136).

Wittgenstein’s answer is that we burn effigies and kiss photographs not because we believe this will have a definite effect on the object the picture represents,” as the Law of Similarity claims, but instead because it “aims at some satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather, it does not aim at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied” (Wittgenstein 1987: 4). Law agrees, and goes on to add that “such activity allows us to express deeply felt emotions. It can . . . inspire us, and help make us more resolute” (Law 2011: 137). The social and material infrastructure of religion has indeed been a traditional mediator of ritualistic activity but it does not follow that such activity is itself essentially religious, writes Law: “In providing such rituals, are humanist organizations setting themselves up as alternative religions? No. To engage in such activity is not to commit oneself to the existence of gods, or magical beings or powers, or any sort of supernatural reality. Humanist organizations are merely catering for deeply felt emotional needs, needs that form an inextricable part of our human nature” (Law 2011: 137–138).

If we bracket the truth claims at stake and recognize the cultural work these arguments enact, it becomes clear what the concept of a humanist ‘project of clarification’ is intended to capture: Law contributes to—and participates in—such a project when he clarifies the presuppositions that enable a reframing of ritualistic behavior, and indeed, the concept of clarification maps directly onto ideas and practices that are central to organized humanism. However, if Law’s reflections offer an indication of the disciplinary spaces that humanist thinkers frequently enter into, it is when we look more closely at relations between anthropology and organized humanism in the latter half of the twentieth century that the generative historical imbrication of the two becomes evident and we begin to see points at which distinctions between the two dissolve—so that anthropological practice becomes humanist practice.
As a key twentieth-century anthropologist, Raymond Firth needs no extended introduction here, but his dedication to humanism is noteworthy. In 1973, he was a signatory of *Humanist Manifesto II*, a declaration also signed by public intellectuals like Paul Kurtz and H. J. Blackham—names synonymous with the growth of organized humanism in North America and Britain (Kurtz and Wilson 1973). Firth was one of several renowned anthropological and humanist thinkers, like Ernest Gellner and Edmund Leach, both “honorary associates of the Rationalist Press Association” (Firth 1996: 9). From 1965 to 1970, Leach served as president of the British Humanist Association (BHA, today called Humanists UK). We suggest that Firth’s volume *Religion: A Humanist Interpretation* (1996) represents a mature and sophisticated example of humanist clarification. The perspective that he advances in this book is not dissimilar to the structure of Law’s arguments. Firth’s central claim is that religion is a human art form—a domain of symbolic expressions that index the poetic, artistic, and ethical capabilities of humankind (ibid.: 10). His assertions about the moral and aesthetic contents of religion are refined, and in his writing, he moves easily between an anthropological and a humanist register. One marked feature of his arguments is that these two registers frequently become indistinguishable. Consider, for instance, the following key passage:

A position in some ways closer to that of an anthropologist, is that God is to be looked for not in the conventional notions of Creator who made the world, tutelary of the Jews, spouse to the Virgin, Real Presence in the Mass, and other personifications, but in the faculties or propensities giving rise to these notions. God is not as depicted in the myths and images, but is exemplified in what lies behind them, the creative strivings of the mystic and poet, and of ordinary people, to express the ineffable, to portray in figurative, aesthetic ways the essence of human relationships. (Firth 1996: 90)

This is an anthropological clarification of religion with a genealogy that includes precursors such as Feuerbach and Durkheim, but what is particular to Firth is that he makes explicit the type of sensuous, aesthetic, and moral appraisal that this clarification enables or invites. This second move is particularly apparent in the following excerpt:

A conventional way of regarding the relation of religion to art is to point to the manner in which religious emotion provides the stimulus to artistic creation. To my mind the reverse is more often the case—*religion provides the medium*. . . . in a society where religious institutions occupy an important part of their total field, religion may be recognized as a means of canalization for aesthetic impulses. . . . Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel designs, Bach's cantatas and passion music are good art not because they were inspired by religion; they are religious in theme because when they were created religion was one of the most effective channels of media for the production of good art. The poverty of good religious art at the present is probably the result less of a decline in religious inspiration than of the existence of many other avenues for the expression of the artist's creative urge. (Firth 1996: 46, emphasis added)

Firth is here firmly in humanist territory, where religion is treated as one type of mediator for pre-existing human capabilities. He clarified artistic expression and its sensuous appreciation according to the same logic that Law later applied to ritualistic behavior. The enlightened connoisseur can enjoy ‘religious’ art, music, and architecture provided that the experience is conditioned by the “ethic of attribution” that clarification enables, whereby a special value is “assigned to the act of perceiving things and then setting about deconstructing what they were as artefacts of culture and society” (Magee 2017: 4). To borrow a phrase from Asad, for humanists, religion is “transcribed and re-sited as objects to be seen, heard, and touched by the properly educated senses” (Asad 2003: 35). Taking a cue from Asad’s wording here, we should add that projects
of clarification that take aesthetic expression and ritualistic activity as their foci do not primarily operate on the level of intellectual justifications, since what is at stake is the enabling of a humanist sensorium: enjoyment, inspiration, and passion, felt and experienced. To illustrate how closely Firth’s anthropological reading of religion maps onto current humanist discourse, one need only return to Engelke’s work: “my informants in the BHA would . . . never accept that humanism comes after religion. In a sense, one of the conceptual demands they are making is to return to an inquiry about human nature—something not much in favour in anthropology these days. From their point of view, the point of departure is never religion: religious traditions of thought, belief, and practice are only ever one set of ways to work out the human condition.” (Engelke 2015b: 142).

For a specific example of this attitude, consider an interview with Andrew Copson, chief executive of Humanists UK. Copson was asked to recommend five books about humanism, or books that express humanist sensibilities. Among other titles, he chose Philip Pullman’s fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*. Pullman is a patron of Humanists UK, but that is not why Copson selected the trilogy. The interviewer was puzzled, having previously wondered about Pullman’s writing: “I remember listening to it with my kids in the car, and wondering, ‘Is he very religious or very unreligious?’ It was hard to figure out” (Roell 2017). Copson’s response is noteworthy: “He uses creative and very spiritual language in his writing and deals very well with the intangible. But I think we’re wrong to associate those elevated ideas and cultural concepts purely with religion. As Richard Norman [author of *On Humanism*, one of the other books that Copson recommends] says, that language isn’t just religious language. It’s an essential part of human experience—that religions have purloined and that we have got to reclaim.” (ibid.).

The clarification of ritual conduct (enabling the training of celebrants and the provision of ceremonies) and the clarification of wonder (e.g., the reclamation of artistic inspiration and poetic language) are two major humanist undertakings, but the clarification of morality as a human domain is perhaps the most significant one, since it constitutes the precondition for any claim that humans are capable of ethical conduct independently of the transcendent organizing principles typically associated with religion: “A major reason this argument is made is to challenge the notion that religion is the wellspring of morality and ethics—that religion has a monopoly over the good. Being ‘good without God’ has always been possible, according to humanists” (Engelke 2015b: 140). Without wishing to skirt over distinctions between liberal and Marxist humanism, Sonja Luehrmann’s work contains an example that identifies the clarification of morality in a different time and place: “Soviet atheists were at pains to show that morality did not originate from religion but was merely appropriated by religious thought. ‘[M]orality is secular in origin,’ insisted the elderly philosopher Nikolai Ivanovich Guvanov during a meeting of the executive board of the Knowledge Society. ‘We work on separating morality from religion in order to define and highlight secular morality.’” (Luehrmann 2015: 106).

We have seen, then, how dilemmas of clarification are central to both the thinking and practice of organized humanism, and relatedly we have examined certain key imbrications of anthropological and humanistic thought. If humanists have looked to anthropology to help them clarify human or cultural elements of ‘religion,’ anthropologists have played a key role in organized humanist movements in turn, with Firth, in particular, keen to establish—to clarify—which elements of ‘religion’ are simply a part of human nature. However, such dilemmas are not restricted to domains of organized humanism but are widely distributed throughout nonreligious social formations, as we will show by way of two illustrative examples that give a broader sense of what the concept of clarification is intended to capture and hint at its wider conceptual relevance.

The first example comes from Samuli Schielke’s research in Cairo. He claims that “religion has not disappeared” from the lives of his informants, who nonetheless see themselves as “clearly
A man named Sayyid is an “admirer of Qur’anic recitation and Sufi music”—but he regards these as “human invention[s]” (ibid.: 307). Schielke argues that his informants must reconcile this seeming contradiction by framing “Islam as a culture to which they belong even when they don’t believe in it as a religion” (ibid.: 307). But is there really a contradiction here? If we read Sayyid’s ethic of attribution with a logic of clarification in mind, there is nothing surprising about his sensibilities—without wishing to assign a single or insular genealogy to clarification, this is precisely how Firth and other humanists reason.

The second example comes from the critic John Semley’s review of Martin Scorsese’s film *Silence*, published in *Salon*. His review is titled: “An atheist’s guide to Scorsese’s ‘Silence’: You don’t need faith to be astonished by the faithful” (Semley 2017). The film, based on an acclaimed novel by Shūsaku Endō (1966), follows a pair of Jesuit missionaries as they travel through seventeenth-century Japan during the violent aftermath of the failed Shimabara Rebellion. The two Jesuit priests are captured and suffer torture at the hands of shogunate prefects. Semley is confused at his sense of reverence for the two Jesuits, who refuse to recant their faith even as their captors begin to torture and execute Japanese Catholics. In managing to resolve his confusion, it is clear that the argumentative form resembles the propositions put forward by Firth and Law: “What the characters in ‘Silence’ possess is that which faith ultimately bestows: strength. And even if you believe, as I do, that there is no God and that there’s no army of angels juicing the spirit with the fortifying stuff of religious devotion, then doesn’t that strength just proceed from the inside? From the tortured muddle of humanity itself? And isn’t that even more amazing? ‘Silence’ is a film about faith and God and Christendom that, ultimately, valorizes humanity” (Semley 2017).

What are the consequences of such processes of clarification? Clarifications of ritual and of ‘religious’ thought and practice more generally allow secular humanists to discern which practices and ideas can be kept (in clarified form) and which can be disposed of; indeed, disposal is the major correlate of clarification. Before we turn to projects of disposal, however, consider another example of the continued recurrence of anthropological thought in humanist undertakings. The training of humanist celebrants has been aided by a body of practical guides written to help steer these activities. The foreword to a book titled *Crafting Secular Ritual* (Gordon-Lennox 2017) is authored by Isabel Russo, the Head of Ceremonies at Humanists UK. Russo begins by declaring, like Law, that “[t]he need for ritual is innate. We need ritual . . . to connect with our deepest thoughts and feelings” (Gordon-Lennox 2017: 11). One chapter is dedicated to “our ritual heritage” (Gordon-Lennox 2017: 21) and it starts with a description of a !Kung dancing ritual from an ethnographic study by Richard Katz, who quotes a !Kung idiom: “Being at a dance makes our hearts happy” (Katz 1982: 34). The language of Gordon-Lennox’s book is peppered with references of this sort: “As for those in the secular category, there are more and more competent ritual artists trained to creatively meet their need for ceremony. In the tradition of the ancient hunter-gatherers, they craft fitting ceremonies that ‘make hearts happy’” (Gordon-Lennox 2017: 30).

Thus, it is not the case that humanism ‘borrows’ ritual from religion. It is more accurate to say that organized humanism borrows from anthropology—but this implies that the two are distinct and easily separated and this is not always the case. Of course, there are also revealing contrasts. It is clear that nonreligious people and movements that are engaged in projects of clarification are not blind to ambiguities, blurred boundaries, and hybrids. It is because ritualistic conduct and poetic language has so often connoted religiosity that humanists have spent so much energy seeking to clarify it, and it is possible to approach such projects as the construction and policing of a substantial category: the human, and thus nonreligious.

Our strong hesitation in this essay about such terms as mirroring, borrowing, and equivalence is not grounded in a terminological deference to emic humanist discourse. As Firth’s work
demonstrates, to take humanism seriously is to take anthropology seriously. It is a kind of anthropology that, as Engelke puts it, is out of favor in the discipline today, but that it was once representative of a substantial portion of anthropological thought on religion seems unquestionable.2

**Disposal and Tensions Internal to Secular Formations**

Sometimes there is little or no dispute concerning acts of clarification and consequently over what should be retained and what discarded. Yet, clarificatory separation between the natural and the supernatural, or between the religious and that which is properly human (or just ‘harmless’ properties of local cultural identity), can be difficult to achieve and subject to dispute and so reveal tensions within nonreligious formations. Just what will be targeted for disposal? It is important, in other words, to avoid misrepresenting the humanist clarification of ritual conduct as an uncontentious and completed project. For instance, there are many atheists and skeptics who—while sharing a great deal with humanists—argue that humanist ceremonies retain religious traces. Early on in our research on local atheist and humanist groups in Edinburgh, we were told about a conflict between a humanist celebrant, Todd, and a member of an atheist secularist group, Nathan. Some years before, this celebrant had given a funeral ceremony for Nathan’s brother and during the event—we were told—Todd did what humanist celebrants are not supposed to do: he talked about humanism. The ceremony, having been planned as an occasion of remembrance and farewell that focused on the deceased and his relations—as humanist funerals do (see Engelke 2015a)—failed, because Nathan and others in attendance felt that the celebrant was proselytizing. Before we heard this story from Nathan, he had already described to us what he considered to be the “congregational” aspects of organized humanism, in which he finds a lingering religiosity. Nathan’s perspective is echoed by, for example, atheist philosopher John Gray’s frequent attacks on humanism, which he once described as “a shoddy derivative of Christian faith notably more irrational than the original article” (Gray 2002). For Nathan, the humanist clarification of ritual conduct is a problematic undertaking, and his preference lies with civil ceremonies. The tension displayed here showcases the potential for projects of clarification and disposal to generate enduring problematics: tensions that are internal to a secular formation.

Key dilemmas and tensions of secular humanism occur due to differing interpretations over what is to be defined as cultural, religious, or human (e.g., Kind 2020). Like the anthropologists some of them are influenced by, secular activists are not unaware of the fact that these phenomena are rarely neatly isolable, such that any attempt to extract one element might be to disrupt much more besides. The language of bundling, borrowed from Webb Keane, is relevant here, for it draws attention to the “relevance of coexisting properties” in a given material object or cultural form (Keane 2008: 115). If talk of ‘cultural’, ‘religious’, and ‘human’ forms runs the risk of meaningless abstraction, the idea of bundling brings these phenomena firmly down to earth by insisting on their material embodiments: “Semiotic [and indeed nonreligious] ideologies are vulnerable, not least by their exposure to the openness of things. . . . Necessarily embodied in some particular objectual form, a given quality is contingently (rather than by logical necessity or social convention) bound up with other qualities—redness on a cloth comes along with light weight, flat surface, flexibility, warmth, combustibility, and so forth” (Keane 2005: 194). Significant for the argument here, Keane suggests that “there is no way to eliminate (nor, entirely, to regiment) that factor of co-presence or bundling” (ibid.).

Tellingly, one of Keane’s key examples is “clothing taken to be meaningful” (ibid.: 193). He discusses western slacks in Indonesia as indexes and icons of ‘freedom’, wealth, athleticism, and
Interestingly, non-Islamiosity (cf., Gholami 2015)—co-presences whose saliences intensify, retract, and transform over time. Consider now an instance from India of a secular humanist activist giving a presentation at a school in rural Bihar, north India, which we attended. We focus on one specific argument put forward by the activist: “You are brainwashed from an early age that people in particular clothes and with particular names have supernatural powers.” This is a straightforward but significant example because it demonstrates that a belief labeled as superstitious by activists is in fact bundled up with its signage (particular names and clothes). Recent works in the anthropology of religion have argued that affording analytical primacy to propositional assents (as earlier scholars are alleged to have done) often leaves unaddressed the question of how to deal with the materiality of belief; and the point holds in our case. That is to say, attempts to dispose of undesirable beliefs (e.g., that some humans “have supernatural powers”) must also often grapple with the materiality of those beliefs. While these ‘left overs’ can perhaps be clarified as artefacts of human aesthetic potentiality or a generalized cultural heritage, there are also cases where projects of disposal become quite literal or where recognition is made of the inextricability of these artefacts from the assents that they are held materially to embody—and hence disposal of an assent will also require disposal of the concrete forms that ‘house’ and enable it.

To stay with the problematic of the bundled properties of clothing in India: consider how at pan-Indian humanist meetings the wearing of turbans by some Punjabi delegates persistently provokes questioning from others present. A Punjabi activist recounted to us the problem:

Some people think the turban is [a Sikh] religious [symbol], right? [But] some people think that it is a cultural thing; and becoming an atheist doesn't mean to leave culture, but certainly it means to leave religion. My colleague in the [Punjabi association] wears a turban, so in [national meetings] people raised an objection, you know, that he is not practicing secularism. He replied that it is a cultural thing; our [Punjabi] culture is based on humanity, and do not tag that with religion. So then [other non-Punjabi delegates] asked me, is this legitimate? Is this person right? I said he's definitely right. Before [Sikh] Guru Gobind Singh there was also a culture of wrapping the turban. That [Punjab] is where he is from.

Notably the French state has engaged in similar secular policing with strict laws banning visible religious signs such as turbans and Islamic headscarves in schools. French Sikhs have fought legal battles in order to be allowed to continue wearing turbans in schools and other public spaces precisely on the grounds of freedom of religion. The French state, like the pan-Indian humanist body that similarly would dispose of it, views the turban as a religious sign; and those French Sikhs who contest the ruling concur on this at least. However, the Punjabi humanist delegates seek to clarify the matter: the turban should not be “tagged” with religion; “a cultural thing” and “based on humanity,” it precedes the advent of the religion it is now associated with and so remains a perfectly legitimate adornment for one who is nonreligious.

Having briefly considered clothing as a material form probed for religious contamination, let us return to language use. Engelke reports that British humanists practice a “high level of metapragmatic signalling” when they interact: “they police themselves and one another on the use of phrases and terms that can be taken to have religious meaning. They joke, for example, when they unconsciously refer to the ‘spirit’ (of something)” (Engelke 2014: 143). The recent ethnographic record is replete with further examples of this jovial but sincere style of castigation. Joseph Blankholm describes how he learned the “importance of purifying one's speech of religious idioms” at a humanist conference in New York, when an attendee seated close to him sneezed: “out of habit, I muttered, ‘Bless you.’ Giving me a sideways glance, he laughed at me and shook his head. I realized I had just outed myself as insufficiently secular” (Blankholm 2018: 9).
As everyday practices of disposal, these are scenes of instruction with an implicit register that often bridges the pedagogic and the punitive. It is helpful to think about these reprimands in terms of Thomas Csordas’s notion of “somatic modes of attention,” a concept that foregrounds embodied disciplines of reaction, or “culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others” (Csordas 1993: 138). The matter of ensuring that one’s semantics are positively secular is for many a notable concern. In an interview with a spokesperson for Humanists UK, Richy Thompson, the German term ‘Gesundheit’ (good health) was suggested as a suitable response to another person’s sneeze, as this phrase “has no religious connotations.”

Rather than disposal, the clarification of a religious vernacular as a human cultural repertoire is, for some atheists and humanists, a preferable option, as in the case of the Egyptian atheists described by Schielke (2012). This is another expression of a tension internal to a secular field. But in all cases, the question of religious contamination always demands the labor of clarification and disposal, and only the indifferent, the closeted, and the persecuted can truly neglect either project.

The Secular, Taught, and Thought

As we noted earlier, one of Asad’s influential assertions has been that secularity has a “self-evident character,” since it “is so much part of our modern life, it is not easy to grasp it directly. I think it is best pursued through its shadows” (Asad 2003: 16). Engelke would later add, in a nearly identical register, that secularity is “best approached indirectly” (Engelke 2015c: 89); José Casanova likewise called the secular an “unthought” doxa (Casanova 2011: 55, 66); and Charles Hirschkind wrote that secularity is “a foundational dimension of modern life. The secular is the water we swim in” (Hirschkind 2011: 634). These assertions are unproblematic if one concedes that these theorists are engaged in high-level generalizations (e.g., concerning “modern life”). But few critics have asked specifically who Asad and subsequent analysts are talking about. Who exactly are these bathing moderns? This is not a trivial question. S. N. Balagangadhara has raised this exact point: there exists a widespread analytical “assumption that their referents [the secular, secularity] are intuitively obvious” (Balagangadhara 2014: 34). There are two troubling and unexamined assumptions at work here: that the secular is unthought and untaught.

But consider the material we have presented on clarification and disposal: people and movements arbitrating the content of secularity, recognizing ambiguities, attempting to fix secular meanings, providing for their proper inculcation—and it becomes clear that clarification and disposal are two explicit processes that are constitutive of the secular. To borrow from Abou Farman, secularity comprises explicit “rules that try to define and redefine proper secular attitudes and logics” (Farman 2020: 17). We can, for instructive purposes, examine a limit case: apostasy. In research on apostates who have left high-control religions, the same thematic recurs often: disaffiliated individuals are insecure about all aspects of mundane life outside of their former communities. Consider Marshall Brooks’s work on ex-Mormons: “As the usual taken-for-granted foundation of everyday assumptions and practices disappears, ex-Mormons often find themselves in a state of perpetual reflection and alienation from the self and the self-evident. In disenchantment, their innermost being becomes the object of intense scrutiny and deliberation as they experience a loss of what Anthony Giddens refers to as ‘living spontaneity,’ or a preconscious awareness of how to handle once routine behaviors, decisions, and interactions.” (Brooks 2020: 205). The same thematic is found in Simon Cottee’s work on ex-Muslim atheists (Cottee 2015: 173).

Analytical phraseologies that depict humanist organizations as mirroring, borrowing, or adopting equivalents to religious beliefs and practices lose sight of the granularity of religious
disaffiliation and detachment. Is it really sufficient to say that an apostate has traded one worldview for something parallel or corresponding? With the available ethnographic data in mind, we are in danger of losing more than we gain by relying on terms like these. Consider a move from a worldview that revolves around historical providentialism and an eschatology of end times—anticipated on a daily basis—to a new conception of the world that completely disposes of such ideas and replaces them with a view of history and the future as collectively man-made and, in the long run, subject to cosmological laws (e.g., entropy, thermodynamics). This is a radical shift in sensibilities, social relations, morality, and life writ large—none of this would be adequately captured by suggesting that a corresponding or equivalent worldview has been adopted. The analytical reduction of nonreligious practices and views to mirrors or equivalents trades the recognition of essential contrasts and distinctive content for generalizable similitude.

The circumstances that apostates face might index limit, or extreme, cases. But consider the hundreds of thousands of nonreligious people arguing about what is secular, how to live it, and how to embody it. Questions that for Hirschkind seemed “too blunt” and “direct,” such as “is there a secular body?” (Hirschkind 2011: 634), are for many humanists and rationalists central preoccupations. For them, the secular is taught and thought, as an epistemic category and a discursive space that is arbitrated and policed through projects of clarification and disposal.

We thus see how the ambivalent and situational forms of nonreligion emphasized in the introduction to this special section also feature in—indeed are central to—the kinds of marked contexts of nonreligion considered in this article, contexts that do not take the form of a kind of secular neutral ground but which themselves require fabrication through situated practices of clarification and disposal.

**Conclusion**

Schulz and Binder’s programmatic aim (this issue) ‘not to isolate a distinct object of inquiry but to ground nonreligion as an important, diverse, contextual, and sometimes elusive dimension of the contemporary’ contains an echo of Paul Rabinow’s late work (e.g., 2008, 2017) on the contemporary, in particular what he calls contemporary ethoses: “problem-spaces” composed of “assemblage work” and “various forms of second-order observation and form-giving” (Rabinow 2017: 119). We have shown that the work of ‘problematization’ of religion as such engaged in by avowed atheists takes the form of a “specific reflective relation” (ibid.: 4) to it that seeks to disaggregate its cultural and ‘human’ aspects. A practice internal to secular communities, clarification as a form of problematization rests on recognizing and managing this distinction.

Our argument, while critical of approaches to nonreligious formations that depict them as co-constitutively dependent on the religious formations they oppose or exist alongside, recognizes their partial validity and continued significance. It has been our overarching aim to take seriously nonreligious practitioners who seek to detach from and move beyond descriptions of secular formations as relationally, mimetically, or functionally equivalent to religious ones—to paraphrase Stefan Binder (2020: 8), insistence on studying the secular via its “treatment” of religion can run the risk of leaving what is in fact classified as or claims to be irreligious largely unexplored.

Farman has similarly argued that secularity “is, at this point, a distinctive formation in which one can identify internal notions, rules as well as, indeed, tensions and instabilities. These rules may well have arisen in relation to ideas about religion, but they can and frequently do operate according to their own internal dynamics” (Farman 2013: 738). We share Farman’s interest in the “new selves, assumptions, problems, and dynamics that emerge within the secular and that can be examined partly on their own terms” (ibid.: 738). The conceptual dyad of clarifi-
cation and disposal helps us to do just that, since on the one hand, the very matter subject to clarification is human-religious entanglement, and attempts to eradicate, bracket, or otherwise mitigate beliefs and practices construed as superstitious, religious, or irrational evidently is one form of relation to religion. But on the other hand, the tensions and instabilities these processes embody are dynamics internal to secular formations. Indeed, in opening up questions concerning the relationship between clarification and disposal in nonreligious thought and action, we have sought to show how debates resulting from divergent clarifications and consequently over the parameters of secular purgation are frequently constitutive elements of nonreligion. Such dilemmas are particularly important to consider, as they allow us to question two further prevailing notions in the anthropology of the secular: first, that the secular is merely the water in which we swim (i.e., it is untaught and unthought); and second, that differences across its manifestations render it a contentless mirage that derives its features primarily from the local and the particular (see Mahmood 2016: 10). We have tried to show how such differences in the form of productive contentions over the parameters of clarification and disposal are precisely some of the major constituents of distinctly nonreligious cultures.

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**NOTES**

1. Luehrmann’s work also demonstrates an imbrication of Soviet anthropology and Soviet atheism—a recursive link that resembles the one detailed above in the case of anthropology and humanism in the United Kingdom.
2. We have indicated that even self-described atheist and humanist anthropologists are today likely to reject the analysis of religion that Firth enacts (Copeman and Hagström 2018).

**REFERENCES**


Clarification and Disposal as Key Concepts in the Anthropology of Nonreligion


