

Religion & Secularism Teaching Resources

[YouTube Video](#) – released January 2024

Overview

Study of secular and secularism has always been of interest to thinkers and theorists of religion. In a moment when the traditional boundaries between religion and the secular continue to be blurred, the time is ripe to return to this category, examine emerging theorists and theorizations, and explore its continued usefulness. The panel will explore its many and varied meanings and how different constructions of the secular help us narrate contemporary phenomena. They will explore the ways that secularism not only help us theorize what some have called the “losing of religion” but also the reconfiguring of traditional and new religious movements. Additionally, this panel will discuss why the current evangelical revival, discourses on Afro-pessimism, and rising political partisanship cannot be read apart from histories of and discourses on the secular. Join us as we explore these and other critical questions at the intersection of secularism, the study of religion, and American culture.

Host

Brian Steensland is Professor and Chair of Sociology at Indiana University Indianapolis. Dr. Steensland’s areas of interest include religion, culture, politics, and civic life in contemporary American society. His books include *Situating Spirituality: Context, Practice, and Power* (Oxford, 2022), co-edited with Jaime Kucinkas and Anna Sun; *The New Evangelical Social Engagement* (Oxford, 2014), co-edited with Philip Goff; and *The Failed Welfare Revolution: America’s Struggle over Guaranteed Income Policy* (Princeton, 2008). His articles include “The Measure of American Religion” (*Social Forces*, 2000) and “Cultural Categories and the American Welfare State” (*American Journal of Sociology*, 2006).

Panelists

Leigh Schmidt is Edward C. Mallinckrodt Distinguished University Professor in the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis. Dr. Schmidt is the author of *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Harvard, 2000), which won the American Academy of Religion Award for Excellence in Historical Studies and the John Hope Franklin Prize of the American Studies Association; *Heaven’s Bride: The Unprintable Life of Ida C. Craddock, American Mystic, Scholar, Sexologist, Martyr, and Madwoman* (Basic, 2010); and *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (HarperOne, 2005). Dr. Schmidt has appeared on a number of NPR programs and other radio shows to discuss his books, including *All Things Considered*, *Talk of the Nation*, *John Batchelor Show*, *Bob Edwards Show*, *BackStory with the American History Guys*, *Talking History*, *Voice of America*, *Religion Matters*, *Odyssey*, *The Connection*, *On Point*, and *The Book Show*. He has often commented on current issues in American religion and culture, including for such media outlets as *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Washington Post*, *London Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Hartford Courant*, *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, *U. S. News and World Report*, *Newsweek*, *Charlotte Observer*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Newark Star-Ledger*, *San Bernardino Sun*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Raleigh News and Observer*, *Peoria Journal Star*, *San Diego Union Tribune*, and the Religion News Service. He also serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *Religion and American Culture*, *Practical Matters*, and *Religion & Politics*.

Lucia Hulsether is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Skidmore College. She is an ethnographer and historian of religion committed to enacting a democratic praxis in her teaching and her research. She works at the intersection of critical race and ethnic studies, feminist and queer theory, and the study of labor and capitalism. Her research is focused on the religious cultures of the Americas. She interprets this topic broadly, to encompass ritual practices and collective forms through which people organize their lives and articulate their values. Her first book, tentatively titled *Liberated Market: On the Cultural Politics of Capitalist Humanitarianism*, is about transnational “conscious capitalist” initiatives like fair trade, microfinance, and corporate social responsibility. She is also pursuing projects on the intellectual cultures of college policy debate competition and on the gendered history of U.S. civic education programs.

Joseph Winters is the Alexander F. Hehmeyer Associate Professor of Religious Studies and African and African American Studies at Duke University. He also holds secondary positions in English and Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies. His interests lie at the intersection of black religious thought, African-American literature, and critical theory. Overall, his project expands conventional understandings of black religiosity and black piety by drawing on resources from Af-Am literature, philosophy, and critical theory. His research examines how literature, film, and music (especially hip hop) can reconfigure our sense of the sacred and imagination of spirituality. Winters’ first book, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Duke University Press, June 2016) examines how black literature and aesthetic practices challenge post-racial fantasies and triumphant accounts of freedom. The book shows how authors like WEB Du Bois and Toni Morrison link hope and possibility to melancholy, remembrance, and a recalcitrant sense of the tragic. His second book project (under contract with Duke University Press) is called *Disturbing Profanity: Hip Hop, Black Aesthetics, and the Volatile Sacred*.

Sources from panelists

Sources mentioned in webinar:

People

Janet Jakobsen- Claire Tow Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Columbia University

- [*The Sex Obsession: Perversity and Possibility in American Politics*](#)
- [*Secularisms*](#), edited with A. Pellegrini
- [*Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*](#), with A. Pellegrini

Todd Wier

- [*Red Secularism: Socialism and Secularists Culture in Germany 1890-1933*](#)
- [*Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession*](#)

Emile Durkheim

- [*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*](#)

- Sacred vs. Profane

J. Kameron Carter- Professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University Bloomington and is codirector of IU's Center for Religion and the Human

- [The Anarchy of Black Religion: A Mystic Song](#)
- <https://www.jkameroncarter.com/>

Frank B Wilderson III

- [Afropessimism](#)

Books:

[Village Atheists](#): How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation by Leigh Schmidt

[Restless Souls](#): The Making of American Spirituality by Leigh Schmidt

Capitalist Humanitarianism

Other:

[Pew research study](#) mentioned by Brian

Found on website

["Spiritual But Not Religious"](#) : Spirituality in America syllabus by Matthew S. Hedstrom

[The Binary between Science and Religion](#): Video by CSRAAC (Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture)

[The Religion Clauses of the First Amendment](#): Syllabus by David Gerber

[Religion, Secularism, and Power](#) teaching syllabus by Anthony Petro

[Afrofuturism and Black Churches](#): Video by Joseph L. Tucker Edmonds

[Religion & the Supreme Court](#): Video by CSRAAC

[The Variety of Secularities](#) by ARDA (Association of Religion Data Archives)

[Religious Pluralism and the Politics of Difference](#) syllabus by Melissa Borja

[Secularism and U.S Empire](#) syllabus by Kathleen Holscher

[Intro to the Visual Culture of American Religions](#): Teaching syllabus by Kristin Schwain

[Attitudes versus Behaviors](#): Religion and Helping Others from ARDA

[Religion and Social Movements](#): Assignment by ARDA

[Religion in America: From Protestantism to Pluralism syllabus](#) by Rebecca Kneale Gould

[Denominationalism in America: Teaching syllabus](#) by Lydia Huffman Hoyle

[Modernity, Secularization, Religious Persistence, Spiritual Transformation](#) by Christian Smith

[Religion & The Future of the Religious Studies Department](#): Video by CSRAAC

Show Notes & Major Questions

Why study secularism? How did our panelists come to study and look at secularism, as a way of talking about what they are working on now? Where do their ideas come from? How is it relevant?

Leigh: Relates to my own relationship grew up in a liberal progressive Christian world, a certain fascination in evangelicalism. People who become less religious, a pattern we can see and feel. People keep moving around religions so seeing and feeling these patterns in our own histories. Then we get to a question in a post religious world of what does it look like to involve in religion again?

Lucia: I do not know why I keep going back to the secular, I often think about if it is that useful of a term or if it obscures more than it illuminates, but it is a live discourse, so I need to engage in it. It is more of an evolution of my interests. I just had a book published looking at what it means to be a person in a capitalist society, and a critique of the ways that socially responsible capitalism, so called, has emerged over time as a space for solidarity politics. Religious studies has a lot of interesting tools to look at these different spaces. What does it mean to be a union organizer, what does it mean to grieve, or to be a consumer or laborer in the world we live in now?

Joe: I was thinking about how black churches gets talked about regarding different movements, like the Civil Rights movement or how Islam gets talked about particularly right after 9/11. The problematic discourse that looks at how we define religion, the sacred and more. I began looking at things outside of religious studies and then seeing the way secular was used.

A broad question, what are we talking about when we talk about secularism? Secularism is a really encompassing category... a kind of introductory question, what are helpful ways of thinking about secularism when it is relevant concept to evoke, for you and scholars?

Lucia: I tend to think about secular as one side of a pair of terms, other term being religious that make up a discourse that gets looked at as an opposition. The language ties to what we define religion as, who is, what is shaped, etc. there will be sets of assumptions. Ideas about the relationship are always going to be intersecting with what is public or private, rational or nonrational, free agent or not. Those distinctions map on to some concepts of religious and secular. I am interested in public and private. Shaped by the notion of protestant Christianity

Joe: Religion and secularism are conjoined twins. The idea that religion is universal is a modern construct and has something to do with protestant Christianity. Any definition of secular involves a religion in some way, the disappearance, privatization, or some assumption. I am interested in how concepts, rituals and phenomena really blur the lines. Sovereignty, myth, sacrifice, etc.

Leigh: I like to think about it in political terms. A way of thinking about state, empire, how religion is managed and regulated. State craft. The secularization of literature. More ethnographic ways. There are many ways to approach these secular moments.

Assignment or Discussion

Resilience of religion

- How has religion pushed back or created new avenues for itself in a secular society?
- Leigh 16:30 secularization of literature and the role of religion.

Assignment or Discussion

Definitions and defining secularism

- Theorists like Durkheim, Eliade, Geertz, Marx
- What is the role of religion in defining what secularism is?
- How, as scholars, practitioners, etc., do we define religion and its role in society?
- Joseph: “notion of the sacred helps us think about how secular policies produce the sacred through certain rituals and social practices” (14:00-14:45)