

# SECULAR FAITH

## SYNOPSIS

Is faith a necessary virtue (a disposition, a practice) in the contemporary world? May it be, or must it be, detached from religious commitment? The apparent oxymoron, secular faith, evokes an even broader range of associations, from Kant's concept of moral faith to Communist faith in 'the god that failed', from Dewey's 'common faith' in democracy to Badiou's emphasis on fidelity to the event. Some theorists have recently argued that secularism itself has a faith-based genealogy. What are the implications of this claim for cultural studies, for political theory, for religious studies, for anthropology?

The papers that we propose to collect will reflect on the paradox of secular faith, interrogating the concepts of 'the secular' and of 'faith' and asking how each term inflects the other when conjoined. Drawing together the work of scholars from a broad range of disciplines, contributors will address the relevance of the concept of secular faith to their own research while also pondering the broader significance of secular faith as a (peculiarly postmodern?) cultural phenomenon.

## CONTEXT

In 1949, *The God That Failed* collected essays by Richard Wright, Andre Gide, Arthur Koestler, and other ex-communists and former communist sympathizers. The collection was organized around the idea that Communism was analogous to Christianity: both involve faith in a superhuman endeavor – and both are unjustified and false. Authors shared their 'conversion' experiences, recounted the 'discipline' involved in Party membership, described the structure of authority to which Party members were subject, and ultimately described their de-conversions.

Over the past few years, theorists have attempted to make an analogous move with respect to 'secularism', often linked with liberal democracy. Writers such as William Connolly, Talal Asad, and John Milbank have argued that secularism is, both genealogically and conceptually, based on faith – and they have further urged skepticism about the claims made by this faith. The contemporary state uses public ritual and other disciplinary techniques to reinforce the faith of its citizens in its own redemptive power. Theorists such as Žižek have made a broader point: ideology and faith are necessarily intertwined, and neither is avoidable. Critique must expose the tension within 'secular / faith' while also exploiting the political potency of the words when conjoined (for instance, in Badiou's fidelity to the event).

In response to the attack on liberal democratic faith, Patrick Deneen and Jeffrey Stout have accepted that liberal democracy is based on secular faith, but they do not see this as a fatal problem. Stout attempts to retrieve resources from the American democratic tradition for a charitable, generous form of secular faith, while Deneen accepts the need for democratic hope while suggesting that democratic faith be moderated by the public expression of religious faith.

For the tradition of religious naturalism, from Emerson and Santayana to Kenneth Burke and Cornel West, there is no paradox at all in the term secular faith. The only sort of faith is this-worldly, and there is no way to meaningfully engage with the world that does not involve faith. Prophecy is the vocation of the social critic, enumerating the sins of the faithful and calling them to repent. Faith is a commitment to engagement, in this tradition – but might the smoothing of the tension between ‘secular’ and ‘faith’ elide what makes the phrase most theoretically potent?

What significance could secular faith have globally? For instance, in South Africa the mainline protestant churches played an instrumental role in precipitating the downfall of the apartheid regime. Now, the South African Council of Churches is a partner with the African National Congress in governing the secular, neoliberal-oriented state that is ‘The New South Africa’. Does this demonstrate the grotesque extreme of the unnatural phrase, secular faith?

From yet another perspective, the question of secular faith problematizes standard accounts of religion. For example, there has long been a distinction made between ‘religious’ and ‘cultural’ Judaism, but does secular faith blur this distinction? What might secular faith mean in the context of ancient Greece, where the public square was replete with civil rituals as well as cultic practices? What does the celebrity status of atheist cheerleaders like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins say about secular faith today? And what sort of contestation of secular faith is at work in the backlash against the Bush administration’s attempts to regulate the religious material available to prisoners?

#### EDITORS

**Vincent Lloyd** is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Georgia State University, where he teaches courses on philosophy of religion, religion and politics, and race. He has written articles published in journals including *Social Text*, *Theory & Event*, *Telos*, and *Philosophia Africana*, and his first book, *Law and Transcendence*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in November 2008.

**Elliot Ratzman** is Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion at Swarthmore College, where he teaches courses on Christian and Jewish thought and culture, secularism, radical movements, comparative religious ethics, and political theology. He is a contributing editor to HEEB magazine, a breakdancer, a stand-up comic, and a social justice activist. His first book will examine post-Holocaust Jewish thought in the context of global human suffering.

#### CONTRIBUTORS

David Chidester (Cape Town), Adam Webb (Johns Hopkins), Melvin Rogers (Virginia), Michael Saler (Davis), Edward Blum (SDSU), Jean Comaroff (Chicago), Cindy Huang (Berkeley), Joshua Dubler (Columbia), Colin Jager (Rutgers)