

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *What matters? Ethnographies of value in a not so secular age*

What matters? Ethnographies of value in a not so secular age, edited by Courtney Bender and Ann Taves, New York: Columbia University Press, 296pp, 2012

Katherine Sissons*

What matters? is an edited volume that sets out to address an ambitious array of questions: "How do people in our secular (or not so secular) age decide what matters, what goals to pursue, and what things are of most value? When does the question of what matters come to be a question at all, and for whom?" (p. 1). Acknowledging that "...the processes of valuation and the making of meaning take place across a wide spectrum of settings..." (p. 1), the volume includes eight studies undertaken in a wide range of projects, from volunteer programmes in India (Erica Bornstein) to an electronic dance music festival in Portugal (Graham St John). Editors Courtney Bender and Ann Taves write that "[t]he question of what is religious, what is secular, and what is spiritual is not simply a matter for scholars" (p. 2). For this reason, they anticipate it will be fruitful to consider how both academics as well as "lay people" categorise activities as "secular", "religious", or "spiritual".

Bender and Taves observe that many academic studies of "the secular" are presented in terms of a secular-religious binary. Although it is increasingly acknowledged that the relationship between the secular and the religious is dynamic and takes different forms in different social and historical settings, Bender and Taves remain critical of the polarisation of these two terms and introduce "the spiritual" as a third term to complicate the binary. The topic of the spiritual is most apparent in Birgit Meyer's chapter on spirits in contemporary Ghana. Meyer reminds readers that spirits are *not* vestiges of religion in decline, but rather are part of the contemporary socio-political landscape. Furthermore, Meyer demonstrates that the spiritual and political realms are enmeshed, even in what is officially a secular state: politicians seek out and claim spiritual support as part of the process of their electoral campaigns. Whist Meyer is concerned with emic understandings of spirits, and their place with respect to religion and politics, Graham St John is concerned with etic categorisations. In his intriguing chapter on the Portuguese Boom Festival, an electronic dance music festival, St John references now classical anthropological works on ritual and *communitas*,

as well as sociological work on *new religious movements*, demonstrating that much can be understood by viewing these seemingly secular activities using concepts developed primarily in the study of religion.

Although the participants depicted in some chapters describe their activities as "spiritual" or "religious", none used the term "secular". It seems that the term "secular" and its derivatives are terms more confined to academia than either "religious" or "spiritual". Furthermore, the contributors to this volume tend to use the term "secular" in opposition to "religion", in precisely the way Bender and Taves want to resist. Take for example Silvia Tomášková's account of the biography of Abbé Henri Breuil, a French archaeologist and Roman Catholic priest, who argued that cave art evidenced the capacity of early humans to think abstractly and symbolically. She presents Breuil's religiosity and his archaeological work as intricately entwined, thus "...complicat[ing] the relationship between religion, science and spirituality..." (p. 35). Tomášková goes on to claim that some biographers of Breuil deliberately downplayed his religious identity in order to portray him as "profoundly secular" (p. 38), using the term "secular" to indicate the absence of religion. Similarly, Christopher White writes that the nineteenth-century psychological concept of suggestibility was an attempt by psychologists to explain religiosity "in secular terms", presumably meaning that the psychologists were seeking explanations that did not reify religion or the supernatural by invoking them as causes. Likewise, concluding an otherwise insightful account of how and why *Médecins Sans Frontières* came to prioritise the preservation of life (rather than easement of suffering), Redfield alludes to "secular reason", a concept that receives no further elaboration (p. 170). In each of these instances, the authors (Tomášková, White, Redfield) continue to use the term "secular" in apparent contrast to "religion". Thus some of the contributors remain constrained by the binary the volume seeks to challenge.

Introducing the volume, Bender and Taves interpret "what matters?" as a question of decision making and the process of value formation. Rebecca Allahyari engages most directly with these issues in her chapter on home-schooling in the United States, in which mothers recount their decisions to shun institutional schooling. Allahyari does not study value formation in action, but accounts

* Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology,
University of Oxford
katie.sissons@anthro.ox.ac.uk

of value formation. Told as they are from the perspective of the present, these narratives possibly obscure some aspects of the decision making process. The remaining chapters are concerned not with how people adopt values, but with how values are communicated and contested. “Secular”, “religious” and “spiritual” are concepts that can be deployed towards these ends, as are the key words highlighted by Bender and Taves in the introduction: “experience”, “authenticity”, and “authority”. I would encourage

readers to consider whether “secular”, “religious” and “spiritual” have proven themselves to be more useful in understanding or uniting the disparate examples of value in this volume than any of the other key terms proposed. The variety of settings described among the chapters has been demonstrative of the complex nature of value and meaning-making. However, future efforts in the study of value might benefit from distinguishing values, morals, ethics, and principles to achieve a more systematic approach.

How to cite this article: Sissons, K 2015 Review of *What matters? Ethnographies of value in a not so secular age*. *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 4: 3, pp. 1-2, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/snr.av>

Published: 07 April 2015

Copyright: © 2015 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

 *Secularism and Nonreligion* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 