

Matthew Scherer, *Beyond Church and State: Democracy, Secularism, and Conversion*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 252 pages. \$29.99 (paperback).

It has become clear that religion cannot simply be ignored or collapsed into other domains of social and political life, reduced to allegedly more fundamental economic or political factors. It is equally unsustainable to rely on a singular, transhistorical and transcultural notion of religion as a freestanding descriptive and analytical category. Other ways between and beyond these two extremes are needed. What would it mean for scholars to “normalize” religion as an object of study? How might we ensure that religion is neither absorbed fully into the political nor allowed to stand apart from history? What do we have, locally, nationally, or internationally if we have neither “religious freedom” nor religion’s complete absorption into the political? What would such an approach, or series of approaches, entail for scholars of governance, politics, the state, and various forms of modern law? A search for new and alternative conceptual vocabularies is underway.

Those of us working on these questions stand on the shoulders of giants. Building on the path-breaking work of scholars of law, religion and modernity such as Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Marc Galanter, Talal Asad, David Engle, and others, an emergent field of study has taken shape to pursue these questions in ways that challenge entrenched disciplinary divides and unsettle received notions of foundational categories such as “politics,” “religion,” “church,” and “state.” Matthew Scherer’s book, *Beyond Church and State: Democracy, Secularism, and Conversion*, is a powerful new voice in this conversation. If you are interested in secularism, religion and politics—or if you just want to experience political theory at its best—put down what you’re doing and read this book.

Scherer rereads secularism with an eye on “how religion and politics intersect, constitute, and reconstitute each other within modern liberal democracies” (8). The central argument of the book is that the secular and religious “form two sides of a single process of secularization that continuously shapes and recreates both” (8). Developing a theory of secularism based on the figure of conversion, he finds that modernity cannot be understood in terms of the overcoming of religion, but should be seen instead as a particular dispensation in which “concepts of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ are produced with distinctly modern grammars through a process of secularization” (8). Both religious and political fields are continually re-contoured and reshaped through these processes. *Beyond Church and State* offers a provocative re-reading of secular liberalism in which religious and political sensibilities are constantly being crystallized into new formations, shaped and reshaped, taking

on new patterns of connection in new assemblages. This results in new “patterns of authority, sociability, and institutional power in both political and religious domains” (83), rather than either “separation” or “accommodation.” We catch a glimpse of the mutual and always unfinished transformations that accompany the modern grammar of what Markus Dressler and Arvind Mandair, in their book *Secularism and Religion-Making* (Oxford University Press, 2011), have described as religio-secularism. As Scherer concludes, the “modern secular age does not emerge from a break with the religious past” but these “‘ages’ co-exist as distinct and interlocking planes within a single crystalline structure” (107).

Scherer is not the first to make this point. What is new and provocative is the intensive focus of the book and the effort expended in excavating and exploring the implications for religion and politics of a rich and diverse archive in political philosophy. References to “separation” take on new meaning after reading this book, with separation appearing as but a single beam set in a crystalline structure (80), that works to reshape both religious and political sensibilities in particular ways, while other, simultaneous tendencies both acknowledge and intensify other connections between religious and political sensibilities.

Scherer’s insistence that he is not attempting to “disinter the encrypted Christian origins of modernity” is refreshing (14). As he explains, “it is not a question of secularism’s being Christian or not Christian (religious or not religious) but a question rather of deconstructing the very opposition between the secular and the Christian (the secular and the religious) that authorizes the figure of separation and underpins the modern secular imaginary” (14). The figure of separation is subsequently and repeatedly destabilized through a series of impressive readings of canonical and less well-known political philosophers including Augustine, Cavell, Rawls, Locke, and Bergson. This persuasive style of argumentation takes hold early in the book with a creative exploration of the relation between the canonical, authorized Augustinian form of the Christian conversion narrative, and an alternate, complex, and submerged image of crystalline conversion—a concept Scherer takes from the work of Henri Bergson (128–129)—that attends it (38). Bergson’s crystalline image of conversion is crucial here. Two passages convey a sense of the work that Bergsonian philosophy does in the book: the first emphasizing Bergson’s image of the crystalline structure of life and the second the image of conversion which is enabled by and situated in this crystalline structure:

The achievement of Bergson’s *Two Sources* is to suggest how morality, politics and religion—those domains differentiated and cleanly separated within the modern secular imaginary—exist in a composite and crystalline relation. To put this another way, within the crystalline structure of *life* itself, morality, politics,

and religion are stratified and divided in layers—the analogy is precise, for like the layers of a crystal, the multiple forms of obligation peculiar to morality, politics, and religion are distinct but nonetheless immanent to a single *life*. (109)

The concept of a crystalline structure emphasizes that conversion may also be partial, that it may effect some layers of being while leaving others in place, that it may engage multiple and irreconcilable sources at the same time . . . Bergson's figure suggests that the moral, the political, and the religious—that past, present, and future—can never be cleanly severed, that their separation is only ever an appearance, masking a deeper truth of the past's active conservation in the present, and the present's continual differentiation within the future. (128–129)

Conversion emerges as a complex, multilayered transformation that leads into an unknown future (123). More significantly, and like the problem of secularism, “the process of conversion depends upon but exceeds its narrative representation.” Modern secularism, understood as a process of conversion, thus appears “not simply to have emerged from a religious past with which it has broken but instead as both divided from a religious past and yet also locked in continuous and shifting patterns of interrelation with religion in the present” (63).

One implication of this image of secularism as conversion in a Bergsonian mode is that it implies no dramatic break or rupture between pre-modern and modern, religious and secular, epistemes. The emphasis rather is on the transformative processes that produce the very *idea* of secularism as separation—processes that in fact re-determine the nature of *both* politics and religion simultaneously, rather than merely separating them along a clear and clean line of distinction (76). This implies a need to continually (re)consider the creative and shifting ways in which religious and political fields interrelate and reshape each other.

This argument is developed through a series of impressively erudite critical re-readings of the work of Charles Taylor (see in particular, 68), John Locke, and John Rawls, among others. The chapter on Rawls is a gripping read, exploring what the author calls the “miracle” of Rawlsianism's “subtle powers of conversion” (157, ch. 4). Scherer is interested in the authoritativeness of Rawls's work “in terms of its capacity to claim and hold one's interest, in other words, in terms of its miraculous capacity to fascinate, to incite wonder, and to effect conversion” (142). Showing that Rawlsian forms of secularism produce the distinction between religion and politics while simultaneously (and paradoxically) violating that same boundary allows Scherer to develop one of his central claims: that one of the most powerful aspects of modern secularism is its capacity to transform social worlds while obscuring the traces of this process (133). The “miracle of Rawlsianism” is located in these “subtle powers of conversion” (157).

And yet what makes the chapter on Rawls truly extraordinary is Scherer's re-enactment in the text of the force of the Rawlsian argument as a means of both diagnosing and destabilizing its persuasive rhetorical power and function. This makes for a gripping account because the writing in this chapter convincingly conveys the suffocating sense of (fore)closure that he (and others, like me for example) have experienced reading Rawls. That sense of being cornered, of being subtly compelled to acquiesce in advance to the normative demands of an argument, to acknowledge the force of reason as Rawls (surreptitiously and always modestly) defines and delimits it. By the end of the chapter Scherer had me convinced that Rawls is indeed "engaged in a sophisticated and rhetorically nuanced effort to foster the conditions of agreements needed to carry the convictions that his arguments are supposed to support" (158). And also, and perhaps more insidiously from the perspective of a politics of becoming, that he remains closed to that which lies beyond the limits of any current instantiation of public reason (162). Hence the sense of suffocation.

Later in the book Scherer transitions to a more constructive mode, recalling William Connolly's approach to political theory. Chapter 5 draws on aspects of Stanley Cavell's interpretation of conversion as acknowledging the limits of knowledge, and, importantly, as a form of reaffirmation of commitments made at and beyond those limits (172). It considers the possibility of refashioning secularism as "an openness to the absence of community and the necessity of pursuing community despite its persistent failure" (169). This chapter emphasizes the need for epistemic humility, skepticism of totalizing knowledge claims, and the importance of developing an ear for (often dissenting, or perhaps what Robert Orsi would call "un-modern") sensibilities and approaches. This resonates in interesting ways with Noah Salomon's discussion of Sufism in his forthcoming book on the Islamic state-building project in Sudan. Both authors press us to ask: to what extent is a critical distance and sense of epistemic humility required in order to pose new kinds of questions about religion-politics in the contemporary world? Have scholars adequately troubled attempts to capture, master, and stabilize distinctive fields of "religion" and "politics," or "religious" and "secular" as objects of inquiry and, often, objects of legal ordering and political intervention? How would the sense of epistemic humility and recognition of the limits of human knowledge that Scherer borrows from Cavell inflect the kinds of questions that are assumed to be relevant in this field, and the forms which legitimate answers can take? Part of the challenge, it seems, is to resist with Cavell, Scherer, and others the urge to reproduce the recognizable in the study of religio-secularism, and to instead develop the potential of critical idioms that have the potential to spark what Scherer describes as a process of conversion "toward a

more just formulation itself unimaginable or unintelligible within the conjunction in which one finds oneself” (189).

And yet the temptation to reproduce the modern grammar of secularism, with its promise of certainty and control—even while at times criticizing it—remains powerful. It is easier, and more common, to intervene critically than to embody or enact alternatives in one’s own work. This is where Scherer’s book does some heavy lifting, making it not only important but indispensable. In asking the reader to consider patterns and transformations of authority, sociability, and legal and institutional power in both political and religious domains simultaneously, the book quietly enacts a non-separationist and non-impositional ethos that suggests an alternative to the modern quest for epistemic certainty, mastery and control.

A number of scholars are working in various contexts to articulate the processes through which what are understood as political and religious fields are simultaneously reshaped and transformed. There is a rich global and comparative literature on these topics. While some of this work was unavailable when Scherer was writing his dissertation, thus explaining its absence from the book, this is not universally the case. Given the care with which the author engages his interlocutors in political and social theory, it was somewhat surprising to see the quick dismissal of much of this work, with the exception of a few brief allusions in the footnotes and conclusion. It would be interesting to see Scherer engage some of this literature with the same sharp intellect and generous, critical sensibility that he brings to the work of the theorists and philosophers that provoked and inspired this brilliant and timely rereading of modern secularism.

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