Latour, Prepositions and the Instauration of Secularism[1]

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ABSTRACT:

Bruno Latour's understanding of different modes of existence as given through prepositions offers a new approach to researching "secularism," taking forward attention paid in recent scholarship to its historically contingent formation by bringing into clearer focus the dynamics of its relational and material mediations. Examining the contemporary instauration of secularism in conservative evangelical experience, I show how this approach offers a new orientation to studying secularism that allows atten- tion to both its history and its material effects on practice. This shows how Latour's speculative realism extends and provides a bridge between both discursive analysis of religion and secularism and the recent turn towards materiality in empirical study of religion.

Introduction

In the past decade or so, scholarly interest in "secularity" and "secularism" has intensified, parallel with the increased visibility of religion in the public sphere, with political scientists, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and theologians examining the contested meanings and history of these concepts. Charles Taylor points out that confusion can arise from taking these words too seriously, and asks whether, given the different contexts in which these terms occur, "they really mean the same thing in each iteration? Are there not, rather, subtle differences, which can bedevil cross-cultural discussions of these

matters?"[2] Despite recent moves towards empirical study,[3] most scholarly scrutiny of "secularism" and "secularity" has remained at a discursive level, exploring the genealogies of these concepts and their complex historical interrelationship with "religion," "the sacred" and public and private space. José Casanova comments that the very range of the concept "secular" makes it "practically nonoperational" for dominant modes of empirical analysis, and yet, as he states, if we are to understand the history of what he and others call "secular societies," we cannot ignore the concept.[4]

In *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad sought to move beyond discursive analysis in order to consider how "changes in concepts articulate changes in practices."[5] Asad's attention to practices of the secular is partly related to his broader project to challenge how the study of religion has privileged a conceptualization of religion that focuses on belief, whilst neglecting material practice. However, his genealogical examination of the secular remains, as Veena Das comments, "committed to the history of words,"[6] so that when he examines forms of embodiment, for example experiences of pain, this is to elucidate how other concepts, such as autonomy, are bound up with the term "secular."

Asad, Taylor and others have demonstrated the importance of paying close attention to historical specificities of the words "secular" and "secularism." However, these discursive analyses of "secularism" have mostly not been integrated with examination of the material practices of "secularisms". This mirrors how in the study of religion, post-structuralist critiques of the category "religion" developed by scholars such as Russell McCutcheon and Tim Fitzgerald have remained at a mainly discursive, reflexive level, unengaged with the recent turn to the study of practice and embodiment in empirical research on religion in

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[2] Charles Taylor, "The Polysemy of the Secular," *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 1143-66.

[3] See, for example, the founding of the Non-religion and Secularity Research Network, in 2008 (http://www.nsrn.co.uk/, accessed 12 August 2011).

[4] José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 12.

[5] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 25.

[6] Veena Das, "Secularism and the Argument from Nature," in *Powers of the Secular Modern*, ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 101.

what has become known as the "lived religion" approach.[7] Since the 1990s, "lived religion" scholarship[8] has reacted against how many established sociological methods of research frame religion according to a particular 'Protestant' construction, privileging statements of belief and affiliation to institutions as the measure of religiosity over embodied practices. Scholars within this movement have therefore explored how it is through embodied practices that the sacred can become real.[9] This turn towards materiality in empirical research on religion can be seen as parallel with, and in some cases influenced by, renewed philosophical interest in materialism and realism. Whilst already widely read in many areas of the social sciences, Bruno Latour's object-oriented ontology has recently been taken up in the study of religion. Anthropologist Webb Keane, for example, draws on Latour to analyze how particular relationships between words, things, subjects and objects are formed through specific, contingent material practices.[10]

Thus far, whilst Latour's focus on the agency of objects and forms of mediation has been taken up in empirical study of religion, those researching religion or secularity have not explored the significance of his philosophical work on modes of existence. In this article, I will demonstrate how this recent work by Latour provides us with a new way of drawing together the insights of the poststructuralist approach to the histories of concepts that has so far been prominent in the study of secularism *and* the focus on embodiment and

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[7] See Gordon Lynch, "Living With Two Cultural Turns," in *Social Research After the Cultural Turn*, ed. Sasha Roseneil and Stephen Frosh (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). In this, Lynch traces how the poststructuralist turn in the study of religion and the "lived religion" movement emerged independently of each other, and argues that greater integration of these approaches is needed to develop the cultural study of religion further.

[8] The publication of David Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) was influential in this movement towards practice and the study of religion outside institutional spaces being seen as a distinctive approach.

[9] Anthropologists of religion have likewise been developing a parallel critique of the overemphasis on the decoding of meaning in religion, arguing for the importance of attending to forms of embodied practice and mediation. See, for example, Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *Man* 18, No. 2 (1983): 237-59 and Birgit Meyer, "Religious Sensations: Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion," in *Religion Beyond A Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 704-23.

[10] See especially Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

materiality opened up by the "lived religion" approach. As an example of what this approach to secularism involves, I will outline the agency of secularism on British evangelicalism. First, let us consider Latour's recent philosophical work on realism.

Prepositions, Irreduction and (Ir)religion

There is not scope here to consider the relation between Latour's realism and that of other speculative realists. Because of his emphasis on the social construction of facts, some have questioned whether Latour can be called a realist, arguing that realism and constructivism are incompatible. Latour however aims to draw attention to the instability of the relationship between "facts" and "socially constructed knowledge," emphasizing that scientific facts are real *and* constructed, objective *and* situated.[11] His emphasis on "irreduction" draws our attention to the resistance of all "objects" to either the explanations of a "realist" scientific approach – the "fact" position – or to the explanations of a social constructionist "fairy" position:

> Once you realize that scientific objects cannot be socially explained, then you realize too that the so-called weak objects, those that appear to be candidates for the accusation of antifetishism, were never mere projections on an empty screen either. They too act, they too do things, they too *make you do* things. It is not only the objects of science that resist, but all the others as well, those that were supposed to have been ground to dust by the powerful teeth of automated reflex-action deconstructors… Is it not time for some progress? To the fact position, to the fairy position, why not add a third position, a *fair* position?[12]

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[11] See Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999) and "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225-48.
[12] Latour, "Why has Critique," 242-3.

In elaborating this "third" position, beyond the binary "realist scientist / social constructionist," Latour suggests that to understand social realities, we need to acknowledge their "gathering." Drawing on Heidegger's articulation of the "thingness of the thing," this approach he suggests is not an examination of the conditions of possibility of a fact, but rather "a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect *how many participants* are gathered in a *thing* to make it exist and to maintain its existence."[13] The closer we draw to things, the more we see how they always resist "fact" and "fairy" explanations. The examples he gives are suggestive of how things closest to us – "the God to whom I pray, the works of art I cherish, the colon cancer I have been fighting, the piece of law I am studying, the desire I feel, indeed the very book I am writing" – demonstrate this resistance to being fully accounted for by either type of explanation.[14]

Attempting in recent work to get away from the language of "construction" with its "metaphorical baggage of constructivism," Latour suggests Étienne Souriau's term "instauration" might be more useful. The term "construction," he states, draws attention to the subject who constructs, whereas "saying of a work of art that it results from an instauration, is to get oneself ready to see the potter as the one who welcomes, gathers, prepares, explores, and invents the form of the work, just as one discovers or 'invents' a treasure."[15] Instauration thus allows for the agency of the thing as well as the work of the human in the gathering, and "allows exchanges and gifts that are interesting in other ways, transactions with rather different types of being, in science and religion as well as in art."[16]

Developing this realism, Latour emphasizes the importance of prepositions. Following William James, Latour states that it is undignified "to call oneself an empiricist yet to deprive experience of what it makes most directly

[13] Ibid., 246.
[14] Ibid., 243.
[15] Bruno Latour, "Reflections on Etienne Souriau's *Les differents modes d'existence*," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, trans. Stephen Muecke (Melbourne: Re. Press, 2011), p. 311.
[16] Ibid.

available: relations."[17] He argues for a radical empiricism that puts experience "at the centre of philosophy by posing a question that is both very ancient and very new: if relations (prepositions in particular) are given to us in experience, *where then* are they leading us?"[18] He suggests that prepositions defined as modes of existence might enable us to go beyond the bifurcation of nature that insists on "the strict separation of objectivity and subjectivity, science and politics, the real world and its representations"[19] and see how these bifurcations are effects of a particular history. He questions whether the deployment of this understanding of modes of existence as given through different forms of relations (prepositions) might "allow… a total rephrasing of the question of knowledge? Can the bifurcation of nature be brought to an end?"[20] He cites a passage from Souriau that shows how it is in attending to prepositions that we can draw closer to understanding things' different modes of existence:

> The modulations of existence *for*, existence *before*, existence *with*, are just so many types of the general mode of the synaptic. And by this route one can easily cure oneself of the over-importance given in certain philosophies to the famous man-in-the-world; because the man before the world, or even the man against the world … are also real. And inversely, there is also the world in the man, the world before the man, the world against the man. The crucial thing is to get the sense that existence in all these modulations is invested neither in the man nor the world, not even in them together, but in this for, in this against where the fact of a genre of being resides, and from which, from this point of view, are suspended the man as much as the world.[21]

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[17] Nigel Thrift, also influenced by James and Whitehead, criticizes some of the more extreme manifestations of this particular lineage, "which can end up by positing a continuity of and to experience about which I am sceptical, by employing an ethological notion of the pre-individual field in which the event holds sway and which leads to 'buds' or 'pulses' of thought-formation / perception in which 'thought is never an object in its own hands.'" (Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 6). Latour avoids this in his most recent writings by explicitly insisting on attending to distinctions between *different* modes of being.

[18] Latour, "Reflections," 306.

[19] Ibid., 305.

[20] Ibid., 306.

[21] Souriau, cited in ibid., 331.

While the turn to materiality in the study of religion has shown sensitivity towards how what has been termed "religion" in higher education is the effect of a particular history that often effaced the agency of objects, Latour here brings into yet clearer focus the challenges of finding ways to describe the dynamically relational nature of *all* forms of existence.

In *Crossing and Dwelling*, Thomas Tweed argues for an understanding of religions as "active verbs linked with unsubstantial nouns by bridging prepositions: *from, with, in, between, through*, and, most important, *across*. Religions designate where we are *from*, identify whom we are *with*, and prescribe how we move *across*."[22] Whilst his definition highlights relationality, his privileging of "crossing" and "dwelling" leads to an essentialist understanding emphasizing religion's social utility in helping people deal with experiences of dislocation and crisis. Extending this focus on prepositions to secularism, Latour instead leads us to consider how both "religious" *and* "secular" modes of existence might also be given *away*, or *against*, "*adversus*: the against as conflict, which strikes and violently hits, which tries to gain the ascendancy in any offensive."[23] Latour's focus on prepositions might appear self-defeating in its use of a linguistic form – prepositions – to attend to the materiality of modes of existence. While there is not scope here to discuss the philosophy of language that this approach implies, one could argue, following Heidegger's articulation of the inarticulable relationship between words and things, that prepositions might encourage us to attend to the reality of those forms of relationality that are brought to presence in language whilst simultaneously revealing their being beyond language.[24]

Latour's realism invites us then to consider the modes of existence in which both religion and secularism are relationally formed. This extends the turn

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[22] Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 79.

[23] Souriau, cited in Latour, "Reflections," 331.

[24] See Anna Strhan, "Religious Language as Poetry: Heidegger's Challenge," *Heythrop Journal* 52, No. 6 (November 2011). There is also a sense that by seeking to describe these prepositional modes, the specificities of relationship become things themselves, reified and then exercising their own form of agency. However this is perhaps an unavoidable consequence of how we cannot avoid using language to describe the forms of materiality and agency that always simultaneously remain beyond language.

towards materiality in the "lived religion" approach through the particular attention Latour gives to not just people, but things, facts, gods, and other nonhuman entities, material and nonmaterial in these relations.[25] Bryant, Srnicek and Harman describe Latour's realism as "irreductionism." In this, "all entities are equally real though not equally strong insofar as they act on other entities. While nonhuman actors such as germs, weather patterns, atoms, and mountains obviously relate to the world around them, the same is true of Harry Potter, the Virgin Mary, democracies, and hallucinations. The incorporeal and corporeal realms are equally capable of having effects on the world."[26] This "irreductionism" has significant potential for advancing empirical study of both secularism and religion. Latour's object-oriented ontology has already helped refocus the empirical study of religion on what its "modern" constitution has effaced: the material practices and mediations by which religious lifeworlds and subjectivities are formed. But Latour's irreductionism *also* asks us to attend to how incorporeal entities, such as concepts, doctrines and sacred others are mediated and become real through embodied, material practices. As the discursive focus on secularism has explored its place within the history of words and ideas, we need an approach that allows us to attend both to this *and* to the concept's agency as it is instaured through specific practices. Latour states that work is "rare in ethnography, no less than in theology,… that respects the exact ontological contours of religious beings."[27] Extending this, we can question how we might consider the ontological contours of "the secular," "secularism" and "secularity" as these exist within and move between religious, non-religious, political and academic lifeworlds. This Latourian approach to secularism could include the insights of Asad's genealogical method, whilst extending this through paying closer attention to how its material and relational mediations affects the exercise of its agency. Let us turn to consider what such a study might look like.

Realizing Secularism

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[25] Latour, "Reflections," 316.

[26] Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, "Introduction," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Melbourne: Re. Press, 2011), p 5.

[27] Latour, "Reflections," 329.

In *Secularism and Secularity*, Barry Kosmin defines secularism as involving "organizations and legal constructs that reflect the institutional expressions of the secular in a nation's political realm and public life,"[28] and is, he states, hard to quantify through standard empirical research methods of measurement and comparison. He therefore suggests that empirical research on secularism necessitates "qualitatively evaluating the symbolic and cultural encoding of the religious legacies" of different religious traditions "in national public institutions and mentalities."[29] I do not wish to suggest that such research may not contribute to understandings of the forms of what he terms "secularism" takes in different national contexts. However, if we follow the direction Latour opens up for seeing concepts as "things" relationally instaured, then it seems simplistic to view "secularism" as something that can be understood straightforwardly through decoding how it is symbolized in particular institutions and mentalities.

Fundamental to Latour's realism is his emphasis that any being is in a state of being altered / altering itself, so that "research is no longer on the diverse ways that one and the same being can be modalized, but on the different ways the being has of altering itself."[30] So if we are to understand "secularism" through this lens, we need to attend to how it is being altered and altering others through particular forms of relationality. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the multimodal forms of existence secularism takes in different contexts, or its relation to the concepts "secular" and "secularization." What I wish to do is to begin to sketch out the instauration of a particular form of "secularism" through specific practices in British conservative evangelicalism, to show how Latour's approach helps us see the uneven ways the concept comes to have agency on individuals in different times and places. Thus, this example, viewed through this lens, complicates dialectical understandings of the relation between

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[28] Barry A. Kosmin, "Introduction," in *Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives*, ed. Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar (Hartford, CT: Trinity College, 2007), p. 1.
[29] Ibid., 1-2.
[30] Latour, "Reflections," 312-3.

religion and secularity[31] by showing how "secularism" has ontological force on religious practice. How secularism is instaured in the experience of evangelicals is related to the agency the concept exerts in other contexts outside religious institutions, and Latour invites us to consider these relational flows across different times and spaces, however, I will narrow my focus here to its particular gathering in evangelical experience.

Whilst the meanings of "secularism" and "secularity" have been the site of increased scrutiny, there has been little research on how these affect Christianities. The complex relations between "secularism" and British evangelicalism is an issue of particular contemporary interest because in recent years conservative evangelicals have been increasingly vocal in articulating concerns about a secularism perceived as increasingly hostile to Christians. One of the aims of my ethnographic research has been to explore the extent to which these concerns are felt by members of a congregation - which I will refer to as St John's - and the effects this has on how members of this church understand and practice the relation between their faith and their wider cultural locations.[32]

How then might we describe the relational modes of secularism as it is found in evangelical experience, without reducing it to a particular set of relations through any one mode of abstraction (be it political, religious, historical)? In order to begin sketching these modes of existence in the manner opened up by Latour, I will suggest some different prepositional forms of relationality that

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[31] See, for example, Kim Knott, "Theoretical and methodological resources for breaking open the secular and exploring the boundary between religion and non-religion," *Historia Religionum* 2 (2010): 115-33.

[32] My analysis is based on an ethnographic study of a large conservative evangelical Anglican church in London undertaken between February 2010 and August 2011. During this research, I attended Sunday church services twice a week, as well as midweek smaller Bible study group meetings and other services and larger evangelistic events. At these different meetings, observations of particular forms of practice, and conversations with members of the church provided data about individuals' experiences. Discussions at mid-week small Bible study groups over the course of the fieldwork, and a ten-week course organised by the church leadership training members of the church in how to speak about their faith with non-Christians were also important for my analysis. In addition, I conducted open-ended interviews with thirty-one members of the church about their experiences of the relation between their faith and their work / study, and their religious practice in spaces outside the church.

demonstrate the multimodality of the concept and the different forms of agency it exercises.

Secularism Against Evangelicalism

In a sermon directly addressing "secularism," David,[33] the rector of St John's, distinguished between "secular… a word taken from the Latin 'saecularis,' meaning 'of this age'" and secularism: "Secular-ism is a 19th century movement, atheistic in origin… Secular-ism has as its goal the organization and development of human life and society without reference to eternity or to God…" David went on to argue that secularism today prohibits Christians speaking publicly about their faith:

> some secularists, in their ardent, you might say fundamentalist, pursuit of their faith system, under the cover of multiculturalism… seek to ban the freedom of speech, both by ejecting certain people from the public square… or by refusing to allow some people to speak at all. Now… you work in offices where freedom of speech is banned, and you work for government health organizations and education institutions that are illiberal, secularist and not prepared to allow you to speak freely and openly… This Wednesday, I had lunch with three business guys… and each one spoke of incidents in the last five years where they'd been summoned to give account and reprimanded for things that they had said to colleagues about Jesus.

> Multicultural liberal diversity? No, illiberal, intolerant, secularist fundamentalism. This is not multiculturalism or liberal diversity. It is totalitarian. And let me say, it is exceedingly dangerous…, because in your secularist fundamentalism…, you ban from the public sphere the possibility of discussing and openly criticising and weighing and condemning the relative value and truth claims and moral values as to what is good and bad in the different religions and no religion.

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[33] All names have been changed.

From David's words, we begin to see the gathering of particular participants in this contemporary instauration of secularism, such that its existence – always a form of alteration – is given prepositionally as *against* evangelicals. As a concept, its linguistic history is one participant: David highlights an understanding of it as an "atheistic" movement that today has a "fundamentalist" force. This linguistic history is bound up with its use by different individuals in other contexts. The National Secular Society, for example, defines secularism on their website as the separation of church and state, and states that "secularism champions human rights above discriminatory religious demands."[34] We can thus already begin to see the concept's multimodal existence, having a different but related tonality when used by self-described secularists. To focus here narrowly just on its instauration in conservative evangelicalism, we can see David's words as aligning "secularism" *with* "the liberal establishment," *against* evangelicals.

In itself, David addressing the topic of "secularism" would not give the concept agency. What gives the concept material force is the particular forms through which it is mediated, for example the performance of the sermon itself addressing this topic. In conservative evangelicalism, the sermon is privileged as "the high point [of the Sunday service], the reason we're here, to hear God's Word as it is read to us and explained," as ministers at St John's regularly tell the congregation. Members of St John's are thus used to listening attentively to David as he, a skilled and charismatic speaker, addresses them, and to discussing sermons over coffee and in small Bible study groups. During the sermon, members of the church take notes, and David encourages them to download the sermon and circulate it to friends. Within this evangelical context in which the Word is the mediation of the transcendent, the circulation of words and concepts matters, and so the concept "secularism" is taken seriously as an object of consideration by members of the congregation, as they discuss David's words both immediately after the sermon, and in small Bible study group discussions.

Latour describes all beings as on the path of an instauration and suggests that if something "persists, it is because it is always restored."[35] Thus if secularism has a continued existence, it is because *other* participants assemble

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[34] See http://www.secularism.org.uk/whatissecularism.html (accessed 22 July 2011).
[35] Latour, "Reflections," 311.

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within and restore it. David mentions how businessmen he had spoken with had been disciplined for speaking about Jesus in their workplaces as an example of secularism, and these incidents gather within the concept, encouraging the congregation to reflect on and discuss other similar experiences, both their own and those of friends and acquaintances. The rapid circulation of stories in the media and through e-mail lists of socially conservative evangelical networks about Christians losing their jobs, or facing sanctions for the material expressions of their faith in workplaces also participate in this concept, leading individuals to talk about such incidents as part of this "secularism."[36] The practical form of such discussions and the circulation of these stories of Christians facing disciplinary actions then in turn generate particular emotional effects on those who hear these stories, and feelings of anxiety, fear and embarrassment also then gather in the concept. The gathering of these emotions then leads to a different, yet related prepositional modality of the concept, as it disciplines evangelical practice.

Secularism Over Evangelicalism

The experiences of a 22-year old I interviewed, Rebecca, who'd been at St John's throughout her time at university, exemplify how the hostility of others outside the church to her speaking about her faith participates in secularism's agency *over* evangelicalism. Rebecca had started a Bible study group on her university course after lectures, and gave a copy of Luke's gospel to a fellow student who attended the group. This student made an official complaint against her for doing this to her course director. Later that year, during a lecture, students were given time to chat by the lecturer, and Rebecca ended up getting her Bible out whilst in a discussion with a friend. She described how the lecturer had attempted to shame her for doing this: "the lecturer… was really angry… He was like 'this is science, not for fairy tales, would you put that away?'" She received another disciplinary warning when she had a conversation about her faith during a lunch hour with a Muslim student, who made a complaint against this. She then

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[36] See The Christian Institute's *Marginalising Christians* (2009) for a discussion of some recent instances of the sanctioning of Christians in particular ways. Members of St John's were encouraged by one of the ministers in another sermon to read this learn more about the difficulties of speaking publicly about Christianity in Britain today.

received another warning when a supervisor she invited to an evangelistic event made a formal complaint against this, saying she had "crossed professional boundaries." Rebecca made no attempt to publicize her experience, but other St John's students on her course heard of what happened to her, and the student curate then mentioned these incidents in a sermon one Sunday evening. The circulation of her story in these forms then had material effects on other students, making them more anxious about speaking about their faith with their peers. One said, "When you hear of cases like [Rebecca's]…, you sort of think that's not what you're meant to do, tell the gospel to people." Whilst sociologists have spoken of the contemporary de-privatization of religion,[37] we see how what gathers in "secularism" as it exerts power *over* evangelicalism challenges this. As stories of evangelicals prevented from speaking about their faith circulate, "secularism" is instaured as having material, ontological force over evangelicals, disciplining their feelings about the cultural acceptability of their faith, and for many, inhibiting their desire to speak of their faith with those outside the church.

To speak of the instauration of secularism in these ways is *not* to say that evangelicals "construct" secularism as if it were a "fairy" concept, but rather to consider how it comes to have a particular reality in contemporary contexts. This is not naïve realism, but recognizes the social making of concepts whilst emphasizing that the realness of a concept can be accounted for neither as an entirely constructed fetish, nor as a fact, but is a matter of concern.[38] As such it makes claims on those on whom it acts and assumes a particular agency according to the number and form of participants that assemble in it. The participants gathering in secularism restore it in such a way that it makes claims on evangelicals' bodies and emotional responses. However, members of St John's simultaneously live in relations with multiple other entities – within and outside the church – that also make claims on them, and therefore not all members of St John's describe Britain in David's terms as a "secular totalitarian state." Let us then sketch an alternative prepositional modality.

Secularism With Evangelicalism?

[37] See, for example, Casanova, *Public Religions*.

[38] Latour, "Why has Critique," 243.

The agency of "secularism" and the claims it makes is, for some evangelicals, less strong than the agency of the parallel conceptualization of Britain as a liberal state with a cultural memory of its Christian heritage. Examining different meanings of the term "secular," Taylor argues for an understanding of secularism as "an attempt to find fair and harmonious modes of coexistence among religious communities," which he describes as "an essential feature of religiously diverse societies, aiming to secure freedom of both belief and unbelief as well as equality between citizens."[39] In the history of non-conformist Christianity, evangelicals have often encouraged notions of "secular" political space at times when they were marginalized by the established churches, in order that they might have freedom of religious practice. St John's is an Anglican Evangelical church, with members from both conformist and non-conformist backgrounds, and thus individuals bring to the church a complex range of historical lineages in their understandings of faith's relation to politics. Several individuals speak of Britain as a liberal state in which they are allowed to practice their faith, free from persecution, a contrast drawn with Christians who face violence or intimidation in other global locations. These individuals would, however, be unlikely to use the word "secularist" to describe this idea in Taylor's terms. Whilst sociologists such as Tariq Modood argue for a "moderate secularism"[40] that moves away from "the strict public-private divide," the concept has been instaured in such a way that whilst this liberal ideal circulating beyond the church may participate in evangelical experience of political life, evangelicals would be unlikely to name this as "secularism."[41]

Thus "secularism" is real, but its mode of existence takes distinctive shapes as it is given through particular prepositions at different times in

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[39] Charles Taylor, "What is Secularism?" in *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship*, ed. Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. xxi-xxii.

[40] See, for example, Tariq Modood, "Muslims, Religious Equality and Secularism," in *Secularism, Religious and Multicultural Citizenship*, ed. Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[41] It should also be noted that the particular ways individuals locate the acceptability of their faith in relation to the public sphere changes over time and across different concrete spaces, so that the same individuals who have spoken to me at times of the good fortune Christians in Britain have in being able to speak of their faith publicly, have a couple of months later spoken of Britain as an increasingly secularist state, hostile to Christianity.

evangelicals' lives. As a concept acts through its material mediations, its existence *against* and *over* evangelicalism depends on specific practices and experiences. These include instances of employers preventing Christians from wearing crosses at work,[42] or sanctioning individuals for inviting colleagues to evangelistic events, and the circulation of stories relating such incidents in the media, or listening to a sermon in which "secularism" is brought to conscious attention, or discussing the concept secularism as it has been addressed in a particular sermon over supper after the service. Thus we can see that the path of this instauration of secularism involves the gathering of multiple actors, including the term's linguistic history and its circulation in other discourses outside evangelical circles. There is not scope within this article to consider further the many other participants we could see as also assembled within it and how this instauration relates to different forms of agency that the concept has in other contexts, both religious and non-religious.

Conclusion

In this brief sketch of secularism's instauration in conservative evangelicalism, we see how Latour's realism allows us to incorporate the insights of discursive approaches to secularism together with attention to how it has agency in material and practical ways. This provides an important new direction in social research not only on secularism, but also other on concepts, ideals and doctrines, incorporating and moving beyond the insights opened up by genealogical methods of study by examining each as a "thing." I have shown how "secularism," as an incorporeal yet actant concept, is instaured through material forms. This challenges research on secularism that straightforwardly operationalizes a definition of the concept, and encourages us to see how the concept is in a sense "invented" through particular modes of relationship and constellations of practices, and that through these, it exerts material agency.

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[42] For example the case of Shirley Caplin, a nurse form Exeter who was instructed to remove her crucifix: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/devon/8265321.stm (accessed 13 August 2011).

John Milbank famously claims that "Once there was no 'secular'…. The secular as a domain had to be instituted or *imagined*, both in theory and in practice."[43] He may or may not be right in his historical diagnosis, but following Latour, we can certainly describe secularism as being instituted, or perhaps better "invented" and altered in particular ways today, and exercising agency on conservative evangelicals and others. I do not want to suggest that secularism only affects conservative evangelicals. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine those other multiple and diverse effects, but clearly this approach invites attention to the multitude of other contemporary and historical participants in the thingness of this concept that are absent from my analysis.

Drawing on Latour, Andrew Barry has proposed that we might understand what we term "controversies" instead as "situations," in which particular entities, practices, histories etc. are assembled. He writes that situations are not necessarily clearly distinct:

> they contain each other and interfere with each other… The scale and topology of a situation, its duration and shifting intensity, its constituents, its history, its privileged sites, its identity and multiplicity, its relevance for particular groups or classes, and its visibility, cannot be assumed. Situations are not static locations, isolated occasions; they are set of relations in motion, progressively actualised. Situations are likely to mutate, and take multiple forms, which may become progressively more or less visible, demanding more or less attention.[44]

Latour likewise invites us to consider how what is gathered within "secularism" mutates and takes multiple forms that demand more or less attention in different times and places. He also encourages us to see how as researchers we both assemble and are assembled within the processes we describe. As a researcher situated both outside and near the lives of my informants, the concept secularism makes claims on *me*, in how I am going to respond and describe it

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[43] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 9.
[44] Andrew Barry, "Situations," paper given at conference "Living with mess: in, out of, and indifferent to Actor Network Theory," School of Law, Birkbeck College, 17 June 2011, p. 3.

relative to other things, facts and people. For example, in drawing closer to this particular contemporary instauration of "secularism" against and over conservative evangelicals, I feel conscious that the word "secularism" itself now carries with it particular uncomfortable emotional resonances for my informants, and that perhaps in this context, the term itself can serve to inhibit discussion of a democratic, liberal ideal. While many British evangelicals would agree with the practical expression of what Modood describes as "moderate secularism", the participants I have described gathering in the instauration of "secularism" in their experience can prevent recognition of this.

Latour describes the role of the researcher as "critic" as "not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather."[45] The ethical responsibilities of the researcher in the gathering of secularism and secularity, as well as religious lifeworlds, invites further reflection, particularly when assembling forms of practice that make liberal scholarship uncomfortable. Latour opens up important new directions for our understanding of the gathering – and critics' roles in this – in particular times and places of the religious, the secular and the postsecular. Committed to his radical empiricism, we might bridge the gap between discursive, conceptual analysis of (religion and) secularism and analysis of material religious practice by examining the thingness of concepts, showing how they take on agency that extends beyond individual speakers,' writers' or researchers' intentions.

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[45] Latour, "Why has Critique," 246.

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