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## "Trauma Makes You": An Interview with Donovan O. Schaefer

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**Matt Sheedy:** You begin *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (2015) with a brief anecdote by the famous primatologist Jane Goodall, where she recounts witnessing a group of chimpanzees begin to dance and engage in a series of displays in response to a large waterfall. You go on to note that for Goodall and other primatologists "we witness in animals . . . forms of behavior that, in humans, get called religion, including complex forms of sociality, ritual, and responses to death." This idea helps to frame your argument as one that seeks to ground the study of religion in animal behavior, where the role of emotion and/or affect becomes a critical tool in addition to theories of language, knowledge, and power. Could you say a little about how you came to develop this framework for studying religion?

**Donovan O. Schaefer:** The book has heavy intellectual debts to pay to the affect theorists, postcolonial theorists, and scholars of religion whom I brought into this conversation. Most of those debts are right on the surface in the index. But I think there are also some less visible debts, the two largest probably being to Donna Haraway and Michel Foucault. Haraway has the most effective account, still, of how humans, animals, and cultural formations like science,

politics, and relationships converge on a single plane. The biological, the cultural, and the technological are a single polychromatic continuum. A lot of my background training was in Continental philosophy, but I realized that most Continental philosophical perspectives are simply not up to the task of thinking about animality. It's not until Jacques Derrida's *The Animal that Therefore I Am* was published in full (2008) that the Darwinian hybrid dynamic—the swerving lines of continuity and divergence that are species—became a concern in that tradition. Haraway's work pushes us to track down the flaws in theories of human exceptionalism, the view of humans as what Mary Midgley calls "a distinct, unassimilable pattern at odds with all else on this planet" (1996, 6). That path ultimately leads back to Darwin and post-Darwinian evolutionary biology—a body of literature that Nietzsche had some passing acquaintance with but that much of the twentieth-century philosophical tradition ignored or wished away. Locating religion on the plane of continuity between humans and animals that Haraway and Darwin describe was the goal of this project.

**MS:** In your introductory chapter, you highlight the work of Jonathan Z. Smith as having a central influ-

ence in shifting the discipline from models that presented religion as an “ahistorical phenomenon” and “a transcendent source of meaning arriving beyond human circumstances,” to one that took seriously how the category “religion” has been constructed and classified historically (e.g., as a “private” affair) and how it operates within systems of power (e.g., in support of colonial power). While lauding Smith’s “linguistic-conceptual method” for helping to expose the “politics of how the word religion is used,” you argue that the model that he helped to pioneer runs the risk of falling prey to a “linguistic fallacy.” Could you elaborate on these ideas?

**DOS:** Smith is indispensable for overturning a particular narrative of religion that feeds directly into this complex of radical human exceptionalism. *Sui generis* religion in scholars like Mircea Eliade was possessed by the revenant of anti-Darwinian philosophers like Martin Heidegger who wanted to locate human uniqueness in the contemplation of sacred mystery. Smith is also an important antiracist thinker, putting forward a powerful repudiation of hierarchies of classification that dealt “reasonable” religion to some and “crazy” or “primitive” religion to the rest. Contemporary religious studies wouldn’t exist without his insight that the category of “religion” is an artifact of history that is different from time to time and place to place.

At the same time, Smith is committed to what he called in “The Devil in Mr. Jones” the “faith of the Enlightenment” (1988, 110). I think there’s a way in which Smith has a tendency to see human beings as first and foremost thinking, language-using creatures. It’s not wrong to see language as part of the human world, but I think our models of power need to move beyond both reasoning beings and the notion that religion is a language-like system. I’m not sure Smith would disagree with that, but I think the reasoning, autonomous Kantian subject is a template that casts a long shadow over his work. From the perspective of affect theory, human beings aren’t subjects, but complex systems of forces, and my argument is that the analytics of power needs to track those forces in order to understand how religions and other formations of power work.

**MS:** For those unfamiliar with affect theory, could you provide a little background and touch on why it is relevant to the study of religion?

**DOS:** Ann Cvetkovich in her book *Depression* (2012) has a great account of this. She leads off by pointing out that attention to affect has been going on in feminist, queer, and antiracist theory for decades, and to identify affect theory as new is an optical illusion—you’re just looking at something that was already there in a different way. There are a few different strands of affect theory, as you say, and they can be typologized in different ways, but the commonality of their approaches is in paying attention to the way that power is channeled by vectors other than language. The 1970s and 1980s were marked by the “linguistic turn” that tended to turn up the volume on accounts of the emergence of identity, culture, and history that emphasized language. Affect theory builds on that turn, but also swings past it, highlighting the way that linguistically-mediated power is only one strand of a sprawling network of power that does a lot of its work outside of the register of words. This means paying attention to bodies, not as sedimentations of linguistic performatives, but as coalescences of linguistic and non-linguistic forces moving at different speeds. Or it means paying attention to materiality—the way that things like sound, color, texture, space, or other bodies elicit affects without the need for linguistic mediation. Even when we are speaking to each other, I’d argue that the micro-features of embodiment like tone of voice or the look on someone’s face shape the impact of that speech-act alongside the propositional content of the words. As I write in the book, “power feels before it thinks.”

The study of religion has always been fixated on the nonlinguistic aspect of religion. We’ve been trying to find ways to explain what moves us outside of language since the field began—whether you want to locate that moment with Müller, Schleiermacher, James, or Durkheim. But as Smith rightly points out, much of that early scholarship (other than Durkheim) conveyed us to the private affair tradition, which defined religion as a resolutely individualistic phenomenon that was unhooked from history and from power. For affect theorists, this makes no sense. Embodied affects, though they might seem to be private, are composed by histories: they come from a public somewhere and they do public things. Far from being irretrievably private, affect is part of the complex, uneven continuum of public and private forces—power.

**Nathan Rein:** You talk about two main branches of affect theory, the phenomenological and the Deleuzian. Can you say a bit about the difference?

**DOS:** There are different ways of drawing this map, and it's also controversial and contentious. Different people would accept this map to varying degrees. And I want to stress that there's a robust, fluid contact zone between these two streams, which is why I tried in the book as much as possible to use the language of "streams" rather than the language of "branches." It gives a better sense of the way these things can intermingle and be placed into conversation with one another.

However, from my perspective, there's a divergence between affect theories that see affect as a principle of unstructured pre-experience, or as something that is actually within the realm of "experience." The emphasis on affect as unstructured comes out of the Deleuzian tradition, and in particular Brian Massumi's reading of Deleuze, which very heavily emphasizes the logic of "becoming"—the idea that affect is the liquid principle of transformation that turns you into something new. In that I hear a very different emphasis from what you see in other thinkers who tend to be more directly invested in queer theory and feminism, who are more interested in talking about actual emotions in their specificity—sadness, shame, happiness, anger—all of these different emotions that—

**NR:** That's the Silvan Tomkins stream?

**DOS:** Right, though it would be wrong to overstate the influence of Tomkins. Tomkins is very important for Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, but few others cite him. Tomkins understands affects as having particular experiential blueprints. That said, there's a way of putting these streams in conversation with each other. For example, the way the language of "becoming" often gets used—especially by someone like Massumi or Tomkins—it's a language of ecstasy, a language of excitement, a language of novelty, a language of exhilaration. To me, that's diagramming something real, which is that we experience new things with a particular affective pattern. That pattern is structured rather than unstructured, but the register of becoming can be located within that pattern.

The zone of convergence is that both streams are concerned with the way that power and embodi-

ment are conducted by things other than language. The precise level where that takes place—that's something that people are still considering. Nonetheless, while I don't think any affect theorist would say that we need to jettison a linguistic analysis, there's agreement that language is only one factor in the broader picture of embodied life and the architectures of power. You can see this very clearly in affect theorists like Lauren Berlant or Katie Stewart, who nicely hybridize Deleuzian and non-Deleuzian versions of affect theory. They don't see it as a necessity to sort them out; they don't see the definitional labor as urgent.

Because affect does get talked about in these different ways, though, I find that often when I start talking about affect theory with other people, they've encountered a corner of the conversation and assume that there's uniformity among theorists in terms of how to define affect. There isn't a uniform definition of affect. This is a discussion where one of the key terms is in flux, and we have to make that the starting point.

**NR:** I'm curious as to how you "discovered" affect theory. When did you encounter it, and what was the context?

**DOS:** I came at it through thinking about animality. Fundamentally, I wanted models of subjectivity that didn't rely on language. In my dissertation I cobbled together a model of subjectivity that doesn't use language. I used my training in poststructuralist philosophy, through which I had encountered Deleuze, along with a mishmash of neuroscience, evolutionary biology, and a little bit of what I would come to call affect theory. After the dissertation, the main transformation that went into developing the actual book was to start reading affect theory. I saw the book project as formally staging the encounter between affect theory and religious studies. So I primarily came at it through poststructuralist philosophy, but the impetus driving it was the need for new resources for thinking about animality. And that not just among actual animals, but among humans, because we need an animalist model of subjectivity for human beings, and I think affect theory offers that.

**NR:** Why are you convinced that we need that?

**DOS:** We go off course when we understand human

beings as fundamentally cognition-sovereign beings. When we see ourselves as fundamentally rational or fundamentally linguistic, we miss the much deeper textures of embodied life that make cognition and subjectivity possible. The ghost of the Enlightenment still haunts the humanities, and it shows up to scare us into thinking that we need to see human beings as, first and foremost, top-down, thinking creatures. I don't want to give this the status of a formal ideology. To me, it has the kind of diffuse structure of a formation of common sense. It crops up in odd places and fills in certain holes, but it doesn't necessarily programmatically structure our understanding of what it means to be a human being.

A few months ago I was at a seminar, and we started talking about babies, and why it is that human beings and other animals find babies so captivating. And someone at this seminar said, "I think that we admire babies *because they represent the future.*" That, to me, is that ghost. It was said with complete conviction, and with the confidence that common sense would rise to the defense of this perspective—that human beings are first and foremost cognizing beings, who approach the world in a way that is fundamentally organized linguistically, rationally, and cognitively. I see affect theory and the animalist approach emerging out of it as a way of flushing that out, adding these extra dimensions that are necessary for a full-spectrum account of power.

**MS:** Following your introduction and your first chapter, entitled "Religion, Language, Affect," you divide the rest of the book up into three main categories or concepts—*intransigence*, *compulsion*, and *accident*—with a theoretical chapter on each followed by a case study. While there is much to discuss here (too much for an interview!), could you say something about these concepts and why you've found them useful in theorizing religious affects?

**DOS:** I wanted to introduce affect theory to religion scholars (and other humanists) but in the process of writing realized that it couldn't be captured in a single idea—it's a conversation, not a solo line of critique. At the same time, I want the book to offer specific conceptual tools rather than review the available literature.

In brief, *intransigence* is about what it means to think of affects as linked to durable, semi-stable features of embodied life. It brings affect theory into

conversation with evolutionary biology to remap the "nature-nurture" problem and solve it in a new way, emphasizing that embodied life is always a hybrid system of quickly changing and slowly changing forces. This is why the book takes the contentious line that affect is structured, rather than structureless: the particular affective template that we exhibit is a feature of the slow-moving evolutionary trajectories that have produced our bodies (and will someday produce different bodies and different affective templates) plus the fast-moving personal-cultural histories of our own experience.

Compulsion is about what it means to think of affects as sovereign in embodied life. Rather than consciously choosing to do things, bodies are moved by tissues of affects pulling in different directions. Some models of power assume that affects can put a bit of spin on power and subtly redirect it, but ultimately, at the heart of every decision, is a sovereign, thinking subject. My take would be that affects are the substance of power. To change affects is to directly alter the configuration of power.

Accident means that in the wake of the affective turn, we need to rethink the way that we analyze the "rationality" of human or animal behavior, including religion. It's an argument against two inter-related mistakes: the quasi-Marxist social-rhetorical approach to religion that sees it as a strategy of deception designed to mask sinister political or economic interests, and the adaptationist approach to evolutionary biology that assumes that every feature of human/animal embodied life must be "adaptive" within a survival economy. Both are wrong. When you shuffle affect theory and post-Darwinian evolutionary biology together, you end up at the realization that embodied life is deeply complicated, and assessing everything according to what is "rational" for a given situation doesn't get at that complexity.

**NR:** I've worked on the Protestant Reformation, and in some of my sources, you can see Protestant doctrinal innovations as essentially trying to shape a certain kind of subjective experience. In popular polemical writings, Protestant writers aimed at an audience of ordinary folks. They use invective; they use doggerel; they use lots of pictures. The idea is that if you correctly absorb these lessons, you'll learn what you need to be a good Protestant. And those lessons are that you have to be angry at the right people; you have to be afraid of the right things; you have



to be proud of the right things. A lot of that seems much more primary, more immediate, than the belief in justification by faith, or anything like that. There's a very charged nexus of all these different identities. For example, to be a Protestant in this little milieu that I was looking at, is very much to be a German. It's as if you have to *feel* that Germanness, and be *proud* to be a German, and be *proud* of being a city-dweller, not some aristocratic lord in a castle. In this context, you're missing something if you think that a religious identity can be described primarily in terms of official doctrines or church practices. But it wasn't until I encountered the concept of affect that I had a name for that.

**DOS:** In general, in the humanities, we have somewhat thin accounts of persuasion and conversion. We don't actually have consistently effective models for thinking about why people change their minds under certain circumstances. The two models that are available to us are, first, some version of positivist rationalism, which says that people change their minds when they encounter arguments that assemble information in a rationally cogent way. Or, second, some version of rhetorical analysis—going back to Aristotle—that says people are persuaded when they're deceived by their emotions; emotions have been used to whip them up into a frenzy, and their rational decision-making has been deactivated. We need a model that is in between those things, one that recognizes that people change their minds because of a complicated convergence of forces. Two people could be looking at exactly the same set of information—at exactly the same set of arguments—and yet there's something that is *external* to the cluster of arguments and the grid of information in front of them, and that's what actually decides for them what they find persuasive. We draw that picture by paying attention to affects.

**NR:** Ruth Leys, in "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," is especially concerned with intention or purpose (2011). Affect theory, in her view, presents us with an "anti-intentionalist" paradigm for thinking about how people operate in the world. One of the interesting components of her critique is political. If this is how you think about how people make decisions, she argues, then there's really no such thing as a rational politics. You're undercutting the power of liberatory arguments to persuade people of anything.

**DOS:** On one level, it is an absolutely fair critique, and it addresses certain gaps that affect theory hasn't gotten to yet. One of them I see as the relationship between affect and rationality. Lauren Berlant has this term, "sensualized epistemology"; she says Eve Sedgwick has a sensualized epistemology. But I don't think she has a full-fledged account of what it would mean to call a human being a thinking creature *and* to also be thoroughly determined by affects—which is a claim that I would make. That's something that I'm very interested in. In my next project, on affect theory, science and technology studies, and secularism, I want to look at this.

In that sense, I think Leys is onto something. On the other hand, it's hard for me to shake the sense that there's something irreducibly liberal about that critique, that she fundamentally wants to restore to human beings a dimension of unfettered agency that is ours and really ours alone. The way that I see it, the history of the humanities since Marx—even since Hegel—has been about complicating, if not repudiating, this notion that we belong to ourselves alone, that we own our intentions, and that we make free decisions as autonomous agents. The Marxist perspective, which I think is a necessary voice in this conversation, says: what you think is *you*, what you think is your *intention*, is at least in part a function of the circumstances out of which you emerge. You need to be suspicious precisely of *this very claim* that you own your intentions, because that is itself an ideological artifact. It is itself something produced by a particular set of material conditions, which are working through you in order to make you *feel* free. I think that it's reckless to completely shun that Marxist perspective, even though I don't want to give that perspective the run of the course.

On the other hand, Leys is coming from a very particular position within trauma theory. From that perspective, Leys has concluded that having one's sense of agency dissolve can be retraumatizing. She is distinctly worried about what happens when you put pressure on the concept of agency, and she's invested in the healing potential of a liberal model of agency. That's a critique that needs to be taken seriously. That's something that I want to see emerge as a stronger voice within affect theory discussions.

I'm interested in the question, what does it *feel like* to be told that you're free, to assert your freedom? I'm skeptical towards the notion of freedom as a metaphysical property. I don't think that it's right to

see human beings as free, with a capital “F.” Or maybe a better way of putting it is this: I think freedom is meaningful as a kind of on-the-ground political category, but liberty with a capital “L” is something that we need to be wary towards.

However, I think that part of the reason why the discourse of capital-L Liberty is so powerful is that there’s a vivid affective charge that goes along with the discourse of “standing your ground,” being your own individual, and not letting other people tell you what to do. That’s not just a neutral ideological posture. That’s a very specific affective weave, which comes together and produces political effects because it’s so affectively powerful. At the same time, though, I don’t simply want to say that this is poisonous. Partly what Leys is picking up on is that there’s also healing potential in the power of that affective program.

**NR:** If you think of the history of the various progressive movements of the 20th century, they’re partially about agency—people gaining a sense of agency, people whose subjectivity had up to that point been constructed largely in terms of lacking all agency.

**DOS:** But let’s also talk about the history of the various right-wing movements of the twentieth century and the way that they traffic in a language of defiance that draws on that register of agency. Throughout the history of conservative politics—even going back to the example that you mentioned earlier, these Protestant movements that take on this anti-aristocratic bent—that’s all part of this affective tissue, albeit deployed in different historical contexts, and generating different political effects in those contexts.

**NR:** One of those sixteenth-century pamphlets I mentioned illustrates what you’re talking about. In one satirical song, there’s the line, “I’d rather be a heretic than a turncoat” (Rein 2008, 181n52). This is all in the context of talking about correct doctrine.

**DOS:** That idea has resonances in conservative rhetoric in the twenty-first century. We actually have laws called “stand-your-ground laws” that, by interlacing with economic and racial politics, produce regimes of violence. Stand Your Ground doctrines took center stage in the national conversation around the Tray-

von Martin case. You have someone who is drinking the water of this affective paradigm, someone who says, “This person is stealing from me. They need to die.” And that affectively charged idea is picked up and defended by a right-wing mediasphere—that if somebody steals from you, they deserve to die. Or even if they are under suspicion of stealing from you. That element of defiance in twenty-first-century American politics is a direct descendant of your pamphlet.

**NR:** One of the things that really seems to attract people to Donald Trump is this idea that he says *what he really thinks*—that is, he says what *I* think but never felt I was allowed to say. This idea of constraint, that there are limits on what sorts of feelings are acceptable, produces its own set of associated affects. People who are drawn to him seem to feel they are laboring with a “split self,” à la Frantz Fanon. In public they have to pretend not to be racist, but really, deep down, it seems to be a kind of secret truth that everybody hates everybody. In reality, we live in this Hobbesian world; we worship winners. This doubleness has an affective dimension—there’s the public face of so-called “political correctness” that everyone is supposed to present, but then there’s what’s really underneath it. Trump seems to break down that distinction, and it’s such a relief, such a catharsis.

I want to ask you, going back to the theme of intention, to comment on the idea of the will.

**DOS:** I’m a will skeptic. When we zoom in on the concept of will, I think we’re going to see that it isn’t a unified, fluid force that marches around in the psyche solving problems as long as it has the resources to do so. I think we’re going to see an affective economy. We’re going to see a system in tension, where certain forces are pulling on other forces and making things possible.

One of my favorite lines in Tomkins is, “One can frighten the soldier out of cowardice by making him more afraid of cowardice than of death” (1995, 57). To me, that’s what will is. Will is a function of an affective economy that has been composed or disciplined in a particular way. It transacts with a neoliberal discourse that says, “Well, people who are in poverty, they just need willpower. They just need the will to pull themselves out of the economic and political situations that they find themselves in.” I

was reading something on a conservative blog the other day about how, during the Great Depression, people moved. There were massive intra-national migrations, this post argued, because Americans had the *will* to move somewhere else to find work, and it is a moral failing of our current generations that they are unwilling to move in order to find work—why don't they have the willpower to do this?

From my perspective, that's the consummately neoliberal move—to say that people are morally responsible for the situation that they find themselves in, because they *don't want* to muster the will to better themselves. The concept of will interacts with a moral logic produced by the structures of neoliberalism that want to blame people for the situation that they're in. It seems to me that certain formations of privilege make possible certain horizons of risk-taking or enterprise, or even something like voluntarily taking on certain degrees of psychic hardship in the short term in order to benefit in the long term. Those effects are built by affective economies in conjunction with material economies. This is speculative, but my guess is that that's what "will" is going to be seen to be, as we look more closely at it.

**NR:** I'm partly raising this question because I'm still thinking about Leys' critique, coming from the perspective of trauma theory.

**DOS:** Trauma is a great example. Can you will yourself out of trauma? This is the right-wing critique of what they think "trigger warnings" are—which they don't understand at all—but they say people just need to "will" themselves to be tougher. Will yourself out of the trauma of gendered violence or racialized violence or economic violence. Get over it. That's the same sort of moralistic logic of willpower, which ultimately is conformable to a neoliberal understanding that doesn't recognize that bodies are not sovereign over the way that they react to their world.

That doesn't mean that there aren't ways that people can fail to take resources that are in front of them in order to improve their circumstances. But there's no way that you can just *get over* something. You can't abolish trauma by an act of will power. Trauma *makes* you as a traumatized subject who has absorbed a certain pattern of response to the world. People who are traumatized *want* to get over it. The will is there. And yet it's not possible for us. That's

where I feel like the category of will needs to be seen as something much more complicated than the classic liberal analytics would have it.

**NR:** We can make distinctions between the will as metaphysically real, and the will as an intimately felt experience. We know what it feels like to make choices or to be empowered. In the case of a traumatized subject, presumably the experiences of choosing and of willing are important. My wife, for example, works with pregnant women who are having substance abuse problems. In these situations, despair is the enemy, which in turn highlights the idea of responsibility. Whether one feels that one is responsible, or whether one feels at the mercy of circumstances—that can have a profound effect on the way we live our lives. Convincing someone who feels powerless that she's not powerless can be healing.

**DOS:** We need to talk about what it means to *feel* agency. How do we experience our own empowerment as something that is healing, as something that enables us to become more resilient and more capable subjects? Foucault talks about this as an "increase in capacities." Therapists won't go to somebody who is traumatized or has substance abuse issues, and say, "Look, just get over it." It comes down to creating a much subtler and more detailed scaffolding that gives traumatized bodies opportunities to nurture that feeling of agency, stepwise—to provide an increasing sense of their own agency and empowerment. One doesn't simply say, on day one, "Get over it."

That's where the ideology of will worries me. At the very least, whatever will is, we need to understand it as something that is not a metaphysical property but is something that is nurtured, something that is cultivated. It's an effect of the circumstances, relationships, and economic location within which you find yourself. With that understanding, we can come to a much more textured appreciation of will that might allow us to accommodate the valuable aspects of Leys' critique.

**NR:** Can you say a little about what "cruel optimism" means, and about its role in the book?

**DOS:** Cruel optimism is Lauren Berlant's term, from her book of the same title (2011). By optimism, in my



reading, she means attachment, something you are connected to. We have many optimisms. We have many things that we keep going back to because we are attached to them, and they aren't all necessarily cruel. What she's interested in with her book is the specific theoretical, political, and philosophical problem of a *cruel* optimism, which is an attachment that you have to something that is bad for you, or painful, or in some other way self-destructive.

In *Religious Affects* I use it to thematize the sovereignty of affects, to talk about affects as determinative of subjectivity in ways that are at cross-purposes with what we might think is best for us, or what somebody outside of us might think is best for us. All of the stuff that we've been talking about—addiction, trauma—those would fall under the category of cruel optimisms.

What I think is really interesting about Berlant's work, though, is that I don't think she understands it strictly in terms of these sort of very self-evident things that you do that are bad for you. She sees it as a kind of microstructure that is shaping subjectivity for all kinds of bodies, even bodies that are not in any obvious way traumatized. This allows you to trace the way that all bodies have these attachments that they are not in control of, and that are highly dangerous for them, and that yet are somehow psychically necessary.

It comes back to this question of willpower. Why can't you just be a robot that does all of the work and all of the things that are meaningful to you? I don't know, maybe some people are, but I most certainly am not. I'm not nearly who I'd like to be, either personally or professionally. And why can't I be? Because you're ruled by your attachments, not your judgment. That's the microstructure of cruel optimism.

**NR:** Speaking as a historian of Christianity, I think you're describing what St. Paul and St. Augustine would refer to as sin.

**DOS:** Definitely. I think there's a lot of overlap and a lot of interesting theological work to be done, linking cruel optimism and sin as a theological category.

**NR:** We're always at cross-purposes with ourselves. "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." And "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me

captive to the law of sin" (Rom 7.19, 7.23 NRSV).

**DOS:** Yes. There's a whole strand of theology characterized by that split—"the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt 26.41).

**NR:** In Romans, Paul pours out this crescendo of affect: "When I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. . . . With my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin." In that context, he bursts out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 7.21, 7.24f.). A contemporary reader is naturally drawn in and reads this as a depiction of bifurcated subjectivity. It sounds like cruel optimism.

There's a kind of affective dimension to theorizing. To engage in theoretical work is also to paint a picture of the human condition. To judge from some of the things you've said today and from what I see in the book, your work is a corrective to a vision of what it is to be a person that is too heady, too linear. There's a kind of exuberance about the way you write about that. You're trying to paint a picture that really makes room for these little explosions of untamed pure experience, of joyfulness. You use metaphors of dance all the time, metaphors of abundance, multiplicity, and growth. Those are the images that animate the book.

**DOS:** That's a really generous reading. I suppose this is where I'm interested in bringing affect theory into deeper conversation with science and technology studies. Science and technology studies looks at knowledge production as a process that is embodied. (I don't mean knowledge in terms of truth, I mean knowledge in terms of the proliferation of concepts and ideas—truth is off to the side of that.) Can we talk about knowledge production as something that is affectively saturated? As far as I'm concerned, that's something that affects all scholars, from scientists in their labs, to mathematicians drawing up equations on their chalkboards, to humanities scholars sitting in cafés sipping tea and thinking about the human condition. I don't think you'll ever meet a mathematician who says they don't like math, or that they consider math to be the most furiously boring activity that they can think of. They find it exhilarating. They love it. Those affects of knowledge production need to be theorized, especially for those



of us in the humanities, but for the sciences, as well.

As for the specific stylistic features of the book, I didn't put a lot of thought into it. I will say that the writers that I admire most, like Donna Haraway and Eve Sedgwick, are writers that seem to relish a polychromatic style, and I can only hope that some of that tinged this book as well.

**NR:** In college, I took a course on the literature of the Renaissance. Before college, I had read John Donne's Holy Sonnets, which I found deeply moving. But in this class, I was told—or rather, being 19 years old, I thought I was being told—that John Donne was a misogynist, racist, imperialist tool. As a result, I walked away thinking that literature professors hated literature, and it baffled me. Why would you teach about something like this, just to tell people how bad it is? That was formative for me. I began to think of “theory” as an impulse to unmask—to expose that what's *really* going on here is something that's much less savory, much uglier, than you might like to think.

**DOS:** That's another theme in Sedgwick—the notions of paranoid reading and reparative reading. There's something too neat about a mode of scholarship that sees everything, literally *everything*, as a trap or a trick, that sees everything as the wicked powers that be using sleight of hand to deceive us into turning over our money or our autonomy. In the book I develop this idea that we can have an analytics of power that brings the hermeneutics of suspicion into the conversation—that acknowledges that, yes, power does work through culture, power does work in self-serving ways, and we need to keep our wits about us. Yet at the same time, we don't have to imagine that's *all* that power can do. There are other aspects of the complex, multidimensional encounter with culture that aren't reducible to exploitation and deception. To me, the radical hermeneutics of suspicion is very “heady,” in your excellent word. It's a top-down model that assumes everything is happening for a reason. We need to map things *off* the grid of reason.

**NR:** I'm always reminding students—especially advisees who are having some kind of problem with the institution—that you should never attribute to malice what you can attribute to incompetence. You could almost take that as a theoretical principle. Not every bad thing happens because somebody is trying

to do something bad; sometimes shit just happens. That's where the ideas of accident and intransigence come together in your book. There's all this *stuff* that you trip over on your way to trying to be the person that you think you ought to be, and it stays with you.

**DOS:** That's a fascinating way of formulating that.

**MS:** In chapter two, you talk about how affect theory enables us to re-examine older phenomenological models of religion, concerned with things like emotion and transcendence, by placing “embodied affective potentials” in relation to systems of power. Here I was particularly intrigued by your discussion of Eve Sedgwick's “pedagogy of Buddhism,” where she talks about her own engagement with Buddhist meditation as not merely “distorting or appropriative,” following post-colonial critique, but also, potentially, as a multidimensional form of universal cognitive transmission—as you put it, “a process of coalescence driven in part by a recognition between bodies that a particular bodily practice has meaning across cultural and historical contexts.” What implications do you see this having for the study of religion?

**DOS:** In a way, none. We already know that bodies are disciplined in ways that shape them as subjects and as far back as the early 1970s, Foucault was already emphasizing that these disciplinary regimes need not be linguistic. The prisoner in the Panopticon isn't being read to every day telling them that they are being watched, leaving them with a sedimentation of linguistic operations that rewrites their subjectivity. They experience supervision as a force that reshapes their embodied existence. I'd say the best way to explain that reshaping is with reference to affects. On the other hand, the humanities, because so much of our work is textual, has a slight “lean” effect towards thinking of disciplinary regimes as linguistic. I guess I see affect theory as another way of correcting that lean, calling on us to do the hard work of thinking about how bodies are disciplined in ways that can't be represented in language.

Critics of the phenomenological tradition in religious studies are rightly wary of this emphasis on the pre-linguistic. But the affective approach doesn't deliver us to either a depoliticized or a dehistoricized understanding of religion. Bodies are always histo-

ricized—they're artifacts of evolutionary histories, and they are really only snapshots of an ongoing evolutionary process at the genomic level. Nonetheless, Sedgwick writes that we need to be wary of "reflexive antibiologism" in theory circles (2003, 101). This is where I think her attention to Buddhism is productive: are there ways that certain meditation practices might produce consistent effects across cultures—even without a discursive framing? Experiential structures embedded in bodies (among humans and other animals) aren't necessarily washed out by cultural differences. A thing that you do to your body—a discipline, in Foucault's vocabulary—can shape subjectivity in ways that will be common across time and space.

**NR:** I wanted to ask about the relationship between what you're doing and what's happening in the cognitive science of religion. One of the things that distinguishes what you're doing from what we see there is that cognitive mechanisms seem entirely self-contained. On the other hand, in this book, you're depicting *open* systems. Yes, we're thinking, but our thinking is constantly permeated by the intrusions of our own bodies, or the intrusions of other people. So there are some parallels between your work and cognitive studies of religion, but you're breaking open the individual a bit.

**DOS:** A lot of those cognitive perspectives—they're still developing a vocabulary for putting the cognitive science of religion into conversation with an analytics of power. From my perspective, affect could potentially be a bridge between those fields, and I'd like to see that developed more.

**MS:** In your concluding chapter, you write the following provocative statement: "Secularization is a hypothesis of which animal religion has no need." Could you elaborate on what you mean here in relation to your overarching theoretical approach—i.e., theorizing animal religion through affect theory—and talk about how this statement differs from poststructuralist approaches to deconstructing the religion/secular binary, as well as what it might say in response to more sociological theories of secularization that are understood (partly or primarily) to indicate structural differentiations, such as formal and legal separations between state institutions from ecclesiastical authorities?

**DOS:** Poststructuralist critiques of secularization theory are about the way that the categories of "religion" and "secular" are created by drawing a circle around a set of human phenomena and defining them as separate. In the Protestant episteme, behaviors like law, community, and politics are stamped as properly secular, behaviors like belief and experience are stamped as properly religious. Subtract those labels and the world is just bodies doing stuff (though of course the labels become part of the world and reciprocally influence the behaviors they were imposed on). You could start over and come up with a different set of labels, which would mean different configurations of "religion" and "secularism."

Affect theory goes a step further. Rather than just showing up the arbitrariness of secularism and religion as categories, it specifies the mechanism by which the public/private binary dissolves. The private domain of personal affects is projected in the public domain of political systems. Those affects run through bodies and coalesce into formations of power. As I write in the book, "the phenomenological is political." Some bodies are disciplined in such a way that they can erect a sort of barrier between their public and private selves. But even that barrier is best understood as a sluice, not a dam. Any seemingly private experience forms the landscape of subjectivity that is ultimately the arbiter of public "reason." My next project will take this further, showing how secularisms draw on affective landscapes that are tinged or shadowed by religious affects. The New Atheism, for example, strikes me as deeply apocalyptic—watch the closing images of Bill Maher's *Religulous* (2008) if you want an example—and my sense is that the apocalyptic is ultimately an affective structure. I'm interested in the ways that this affective symmetry means that secularisms and religions end up mirroring each other at the level of politics even as they diverge at the level of belief—for instance, in the way that both New Atheists and right-wing evangelical Christians end up as deeply Islamophobic.

**MS:** Donovan, thanks for taking the time to talk with the *Bulletin*, and congratulations, again, on *Religious Affects*.

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### **Tips for Teaching:** **Guest Lecturing on Geographies of Religion: Interviewing My Colleagues' Students, Focusing on Tangents**

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#### **Introduction: a Philosophy of Guest Teaching in Religion**

I recently gave a guest lecture in our *Bulletin* editor Philip Tite's class at the University of Washington, Theories in the Study of Religion, which is listed in the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies as JSIS C 380 (and cross-listed with the Comparative History of Ideas). He gave a short summary of my lecture on Facebook that I want to use as a springboard for some reflections on guest teaching more generally; perhaps they might end up reading like "tips for teaching" if readers get something out of these meandering thoughts. Here is the thank-you note that Tite (2016a) wrote publicly:

Thank you, Justin Tse, for another excellent guest lecture (via Skype) on geographies of religion. This is the third time Justin has done this for my Theories in the Study of Religion course and each time is excellent (though very unique). And each time I learn a little something more about cultural geography. I'm glad I can incorporate this emerging theoretical approach to my course.

This is indeed the third time that I have given a lecture on what cultural geography has to do with religious studies specifically in Tite's class. However, it is also true that each time has been different. Perhaps this has to do with how I am constantly learning new things about geography myself, and maybe it has to do with how geographers are constantly expanding the boundaries of the discipline more generally; this is probably why Tite makes the astute point that a discipline as old as Eratosthenes is "emerging." It may also have to do with the kinds of questions that students ask me in each class. But I think it also has to do with my development as a teacher, and I am thankful to Tite for giving me the chance to adapt a reflection I wrote about this experience on my blog for this Tips for Teaching section (Tse 2016).

My core reflection revolves around my having stumbled onto a new style of guest-lecturing recently. I feel a greater sense of freedom in letting go of my lecture material and engaging the interests of the students in relation to the material. I suppose this is the kind of stuff about which philosophers of education often find themselves philosophizing—the freedom of the student, the need of the teacher to let go, the