

reviews

DONOVAN O. SCHAEFER, 2015. RELIGIOUS AFFECTS: ANIMALITY, EVOLUTION, AND POWER. DURHAM, NC AND LONDON: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS.

It was language that ultimately saved us from the death of *sui generis* religion. Even lacking in essence, we still had the category named “religion” and the history and present of its interpellation—its (frequently violent) mappings onto a plurality of beliefs and practices, varied in form and function, across the world. These at least could yet be studied—and studied as “religion.” Further, we could conceive of this “religion” as itself a language, as tied to and working like a language to designate and explicate the unstable contours of our world. And as language is a system built upon the differentiation between linguistic signs, the linguistic paradigm of religion also permitted the continued differentiation—once grounded in assumed essence, now in the effects that assumption had wrought—of “religion” from its others, from the things we continued to name other than “religion”—as “culture” or “society,” “philosophy” or “politics.”

Donovan O. Schaefer’s *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* is a strident critique of the linguistic paradigm of religion—of religion as a set of axioms, a language that believers use in rationalistic fashion to comprehend the world. It is also an equally strident critique of the idea of religion as a discrete object, named and nameable, easily differentiated from its occasional bedfellows. Hybridizing affect theory—itsself a queer, hybrid of diffuse critical theories—with post-Darwinian evolutionary biology,

Schaefer reimagines religion as inextricable from the bodies that practise it, bodies ineluctably embedded within networks of power and conditioned by an inheritance of intransigent, accidental evolutionary legacies. The many threads of the work cohere around a binary drawn from an 1864 speech by Benjamin Disraeli, in which the Member of Parliament contrasts Darwinian evolution’s association of humanity with apes to Christianity’s alignment of it with angels—declaring himself for the latter. In *Religious Affects*, Schaefer becomes Disraeli’s Devil’s Advocate, knowingly joining the Primate’s Party and framing the work as an impassioned defence of humanity’s embodied animality against “the presupposition that we are angels, that we can dictate to our bodies how to feel about the world, or lack thereof” (100). The systemic consequence of this critique are made clear early in the work, when Disraeli’s angel is aligned with what Schaefer terms, following Teresa Brennan, the “foundational fantasy” (65) of the liber, the “freeman”—the a priori auto-nomous (self-lawed, self-sovereign) and self-contained individual that grounds the political and cultural imaginary of Western liberalism, “the language-using, animal-eating, male subject who masters the world” (153).

Affects actualize Schaefer’s work of ape apologetics, driving its deconstruction of the “myth of angelic self-sovereignty” (117). “Affects invert the metaphysical emphasis on the human’s rational sovereignty over its body,” Schaefer writes, “retracing us as nests of animal becoming... Affective economies are directed by compulsions—by autotelic forces that derail the abacus of rational self-interest” (166).

Such an affective resituating of the human as more animal than angel requires a similar resituating of human religion, in which affect theory “shifts the focus from religion as an ensemble of well-thought-out rationales to the animal religion of endless chase: our fragility, our compulsion, and our need” (100). This animalization of religion does not deny religions’ linguistic dimensions, but enfolds them in broader affective economies; “Religious talk is a way of articulating bodies to systems of power mediated by affect: it addresses itself to the problem of where bodies go not by explaining things but by instrumenting its own regime of compulsions” (118). Schaefer explores a range of such regimes, including discourses of Islamophobia around Park51—the “Ground Zero Mosque” that was neither—fundamentalist Christianity as displayed in the documentary film *Jesus Camp*, and popular philosophy of science, such as the work of Daniel C. Dennett. Theorizing each, Schaefer weaves his disparate examples into a web of affective relations enmeshed in, but not predetermined by, networks of bodies and power. Schaefer’s text is often as affectively charged as the contexts he examines, his rhetoric—particularly in the final chapter—soars and dives, at times threatening to destabilize the reader (indeed, this is often its purpose); nonetheless, his analysis is always nuanced and apposite, revealing how actors of diverse inclinations and allegiances conduct and are conducted by complex affective economies of hatred and compassion, hope and despair, aversion and desire.

This affective animalization of religion as inextricable from fluid intersections of bodies and power, as bound up with need rather than a system of nomenclature, disrupts the ease of mapping the category “religion” onto sets of discursive or material practices. Ideas of “‘authentic’ religion—whether it presumes that religion is always social control, always violent, or always peaceful” become “unworkable” (143), but the Enlightenment-style taxonomies ensured by the linguistic paradigm that facilitate a marking of con-

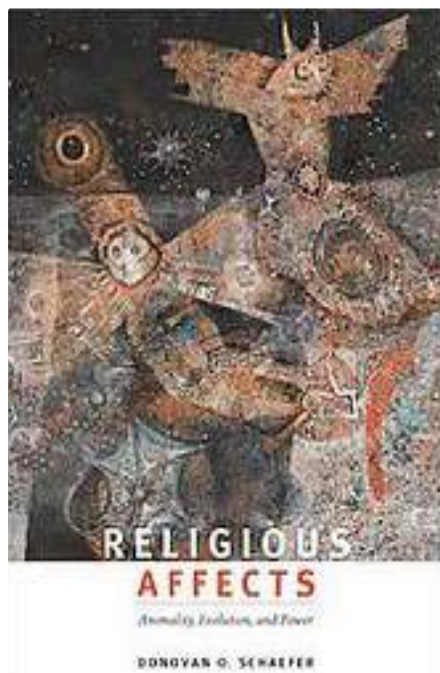
cepts as religious/not religious also begin to blur.

Approaching the midpoint of *Religious Affects*, Schaefer outlines one possible ramification of affectively unsettling this paradigm: “does the liberal model of the separation of church and state dissolve when we imagine bodies as fluid systems of force?” he asks (86). The idea of “religion” as a set of axioms, a language that may (or may not) be mapped onto the world, permits a demarcation of terrain. By marking some notions as religious, others as political, cultural, social, etcetera, it renders the cross-contamination of spheres both detectable and avoidable; to shatter the reduction of religion to linguistic roadmap is to blur the possibility of differentiation that language—as a system built on the differentiation between linguistic signs—enables. Ending the supremacy of the linguistic paradigm (which is not to dissolve the paradigm tout court, only unsettle its primacy) demands an interrogation

of how ostensibly disparate categories hybridize rather than syncretise, mobilized by affects that compel bodies into worlds, heedless of whether such compulsions or their effects are catalogued and codified under the header “religion” or one of its others.

Maybe the clearest—and ironically underdeveloped—example of this breakdown is that of Schaefer’s structuring metaphor itself. Framing his book through the conflict between ape and angel, Schaefer elides the double meaning inherent in the “myth of angelic self-sovereignty.” One thread that runs through Christian theology might aptly be called the theme of “angel-

ic compulsion.” For Aquinas, for example, angels were seen as compelled to virtue or sin by the force of their first choice either to serve or defy God. Phrased otherwise, angels—perhaps even more so than apes—are not free. Like the ape enmeshed in affective economies, the angel is also directed by an intransigent inheritance that it cannot choose. Yet it is compelled not by the surging flux of embodied affects, the chaotic dance, the game of endless chase,



but by a singular love and devotion, an unbreakable loyalty to a transcendent power—to God—that gives purpose to its action and stability to its sense-making, predestining it to beatific fulfilment. This observation is not intended as a critique of Schaefer’s frame, for if anything the compulsion of angels reinforces rather than undermines his critique of the West’s “foundational fantasy.” It asks us to reconsider whether the fantasy of the liber—and the political, cultural, and intellectual imaginary that this figure enables—is merely that we are angels, or whether it might be the belief that being angels—corralling our unruly affects in absolute allegiance to a unitary image of transcendence, whether God or Reason, being devoted to and compelled by it and it alone, cradled in the unambiguity its categorical certainties promise us—makes us free.

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MICHELLE MARY LELWICA. 2017. SHAMEFUL BODIES: RELIGION AND THE CULTURE OF PHYSICAL IMPROVEMENT. LONDON, NEW YORK: BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC.

Shameful Bodies continues themes from Lelwica’s earlier works, in particular *The Religion of Thinness* and *Starving for Salvation*. It broadens her concern beyond the relationship between religion and body image to look at the social construction of the body in terms of size, age, disability, and chronic pain or illness. Lelwica characterises the normative construction of the body as “the better body story”. Throughout the work she explains what this story is and why it is so pervasive in American culture. This is a timely work that speaks to a particular liberal American sensibility. It aims at empowerment and overcoming prejudice in regards to the body, and is especially concerned with ending self-directed body shaming.

Part one deconstructs “the better body story”. Lel-

wica addresses the corporeal history of Christianity and relates how self-improvement functions as a form of religion. She offers an alternative religious paradigm for embodiment, derived from a Western interpretation of Buddhism. Part two goes through each of the ‘other’ embodiments, framed as shame; first disability shame, then fat shame, the shame of chronic pain and illness, and lastly the shame of old age. In each section, Lelwica refers to relevant literature by specialists in these fields.

Throughout, Lelwica illustrates how “the better body story” is connected to religion. She traces Christianity’s influence in creating this story. She argues that Christianity is fundamental to embodiment in American culture. The crux of this argument is that it is a

salvation myth; a culturally normative body will save the individual from suffering. However, is this influence really hidden, as Lelwica argues? What she means is that it is hidden in the sense that most Americans would not immediately connect Christianity to contemporary body ideals, especially in regards to oversexualisation. Lelwica makes important points about the religious weight of shame culturally inherited from Christianity. She makes pertinent connections to capitalism, suggesting that there is a profit motive behind the telling of this story.

It is a reflexive work, in which Lelwica tells her own story of dealing with arthritis diagnosed at the age of 47 and her subsequent hip replacement operation. Lelwica describes how she rejected walking with a cane because of its shameful association with age-related deterioration. Instead she tried to deal with the pain through yoga. A personal journey through chronic pain and surgery is used to illustrate the enduring power of “the better body story”, even for one who, as Professor of Religion at a small liberal arts college in Minnesota, has thought deeply and critically about embodiment throughout her career.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of this work is

