



Encountering the Secular: Philosophical Endeavors in Religion and Culture (Studies in Religion and Culture)

J. Heath Atchley

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In *Encountering the Secular*, J. Heath Atchley proposes an alternative to the understanding of the secular as that which opposes the religious, and he turns to American and Continental philosophy to support his critique. Drawing from thinkers as disparate as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Gilles Deleuze, and engaging with contemporary literature and film, Atchley shows how the division of experience (individual, cultural, political) into the distinct realms of the religious and the secular overlooks the subtle ways in which value can emerge. Far from arguing that the religious and the secular are the same, he means instead to suggest that the dogmatic separation between these two realms gets in the way of experiencing an immanent value, a kind of value tied neither to a transcendent reality (e.g., a god or an ideal) nor to a self-centered reality (e.g., pleasure or knowledge).

Each chapter cultivates a particular concept that challenges the breach between the secular and the religious, rendering that breach ambiguous. Such ambiguity, the author affirms, is relevant to a time when rigid and simplistic notions of religion and secularity are used to justify thoughtlessness and even violence. All too often the secular is thought of either as a triumph in "overcoming" the presumed irrationality and oppression of religion, or as lament in "losing" the meaning religion is thought once to have offered. Atchley suggests a view of the secular as an opportunity to experience an immanent value that is neither controlled by the human self nor conferred by a divine entity.

Written in a prose that is lucid, lively, and provocative, *Encountering the Secular* shows how a philosophical endeavor might be understood as a spiritual practice.

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