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Special Issue! Nonsecular Medical Anthropology

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By Anna Zogas

Ian Whitmarsh and Elizabeth F. S. Roberts have edited a Special Issue of **Medical Anthropology** called “Nonsecular Medical Anthropology.”

Here is an excerpt from their introduction to the issue, along with the abstracts of its commentary and six articles. Enjoy!

[Nonsecular Medical Anthropology](#) (*open access*)

Ian Whitmarsh & Elizabeth F. S. Roberts

A nonsecular medical anthropology insists on the ways medicine and science have constituted ‘the secular’ itself through the ‘secular self’—how medical knowing has been used to craft the secular political subject. As James Boon noted, too often in social theory, “religion gets safely tucked away—restricted theoretically to ‘meaning’ rather than power” (1998:245). The authors of the six articles in this special issue ‘untuck’ religiosity from within the norms and numbers of medicine itself, and examine how ‘secular’ medicine has relied on religious traditions to produce political secularity. These articles demonstrate that ‘secular’ medicine relies on religious others whose exclusion bespeaks latent religious commitments of citizenship in the modern political realm of health.

In the past few decades, anthropologists of religion and secularity have provided a vigorous critique of the liberal political subject constituted through the distinction between the secular and the religious (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005). Meanwhile medical anthropologists have developed tools to examine how medicine constitutes the human. With this special issue, we draw together insights from both these literatures to query the relationship between the secular and health, medicine, and the body.

[Gods, Germs, and Petri Dishes: Toward a Nonsecular Medical Anthropology](#) (*open access*)

Elizabeth F. S. Roberts

This commentary calls on medical anthropology to become programmatically non-secular. Despite recent anthropological critiques of secularity, within and outside of anthropology, most contemporary medical anthropologists continue to leave deities and religiosity out of their

examinations of healing practices, especially in their accounts of biomedicine. Through a critical, relational constructionist lens, which traces how all entities are both constructed and real, a non-secular medical anthropology would insist that when deities are part of medical practice, they are integral to analysis. Importantly then, within the symmetrical nature of this same constructionist lens, biomedical entities like germs and petri dishes need to be accounted for just as much as deities.

[All Eyes on Egypt: Islam and the Medical Use of Dead Bodies Amidst Cairo's Political Unrest](#)

Sherine Hamdy

Using dead bodies for medical purposes has long been considered taboo in Egypt. Public health campaigns, physicians' pleas, and the urgings of religious scholars all failed to alter public opinion regarding the donation of dead bodies either for instructional material or for therapeutic treatments. Yet in 2011, amid revolutionary turmoil in Egypt, a campaign was launched for people to donate their eyes upon death; this time, people readily signed up to be donors. Focusing on mass eye trauma that occurred in Egypt amid the political uprisings of 2011, I raise questions about when and why Islam can explain people's attitudes and behaviors, particularly toward death and medicine. The case of mass eye trauma in Egypt and citizens' reformulations of questions once jealously controlled by state-aligned doctors, politicians, and religious scholars unsettles the boundaries between 'religion' and 'secularism' in medical practice.

[Medical Eschatologies: The Christian Spirit of Hospital Protocol](#)

Jean M. Langford

If much has been written of the forms of bodiliness reinforced by hospitals, less attention has been paid to the medicalization of the soul. The medical management of death institutionalizes divisions between body and soul, and matter and spirit, infusing end-of-life care with latent Christian theological presumptions. The invisibility of these presumptions is partly sustained by projecting religiosity on those who endorse other cosmologies, while retaining for medicine a mask of secular science. Stories of conflict with non-Christian patients force these presumptions into visibility, suggesting alternative ethics of care and mourning rooted in other understandings. In this article, I explore one such story. Considering the story as an allegory for how matter and spirit figure in contemporary postmortem disciplines, I suggest that it exposes both the operation of a taboo against mixing material and spiritual agendas, and an assumption that appropriate mourning is oriented toward symbolic homage, rather than concern for the material welfare of the dead.

[Cosmic Experiments: Remaking Materialism and Daoist Ethic "Outside of](#)

[the Establishment”](#)*Mei Zhan*

In this article, I discuss recent experiments in ‘classical’ (*gudian*) Chinese medicine. As the marketization and privatization of health care deepens and enters uncharted territories in China, a cohort of young practitioners and entrepreneurs have begun their quest for the ‘primordial spirit’ of traditional Chinese medicine by setting up their own businesses where they engage in clinical, pedagogical, and entrepreneurial practices outside of state-run institutions. I argue that these explorations in classical Chinese medicine, which focus on classical texts and Daoist analytics, do not aim to restore spirituality to the scientized and secularized theory of traditional Chinese medicine. Nor are they symptomatic of withdrawals from the modern world. Rather, these ‘cosmic experiments’ need to be understood in relation to dialectical and historical materialisms as modes of knowledge production and political alliance. In challenging the status of materialist theory and the process of theorization in traditional Chinese medicine and postsocialist life more broadly speaking, advocates of classical Chinese medicine imagine nondialectical materialisms as immanent ways of thinking, doing, and being in the world.

[“The Tools of Your Chants and Spells”: Stories of Madwomen and Indian Practical Healing](#)*Sarah Pinto*

A longstanding trope in Indian psychiatry, and in popular representations of it, involves the efficacy of incantations and exorcism in healing afflictions of the mind, notably hysteria. In many accounts, from nineteenth century medical journals to twenty-first century popular films, a medicine deemed at once ‘Western’ and universal is granted the ability to diagnose neurotic afflictions, but rendered incapable of curing them, while bodily techniques referred to as ‘Indian’ are granted efficacy. In this article, I explore the subtleties and implications of this recurrent knowledge paradigm. I argue that a particular arrangement—one in which difference is established through equivalence—undergirds the terms by which medicine comes to be viewed as a cultural encounter. As these progressive formulations are often founded on stories about women’s madness, I ask, what are the implications of an arguably pragmatic ethos founded on an uneven—and deeply gendered—resolution to postcolonial knowledge problems?

[Secular Redemptions: Biopolitics by Example](#)*Cristiana Giordano*

In this article, I analyze the practices of a group of Catholic nuns who run shelters for ‘victims of human trafficking’ in Italy, and are thus involved in

state-funded rehabilitation programs for former foreign prostitutes. This case shows how the state and the Church are deeply implicated in each other's projects of redemption and the creation of new forms of life. In Italy, the legal model for rehabilitating foreign prostitutes is avowedly secular yet also deeply shaped by a Catholic impetus to purify sinners. At the same time, however, the nuns themselves develop an understanding of redemption as a secular life-saving project in line with the state's project of recognition, and thus inscribe their practices within the biopolitical effort to transform lives. Ultimately, I argue, leading by example becomes a specific Catholic instantiation of biopolitics that characterizes both the state's and the Church's approach to foreigners.

[Entangled Bodies: Jews, Bedouins, and the Making of the Secular Israeli Na'amah Razon](#)

Taking Israel's National Health Insurance Law as a point of entry, in this article I probe how notions of equality and citizenship, secularism, and religion become entangled in the experience of Negev/Naqab Bedouins, who are Palestinian citizens of Israel. Drawing on ethnographic and archival research, I show how Jewish citizens have come to represent the secular and modern citizens in the region, while Bedouins, although mandated and claimed by policy and providers to be the 'same' and 'equal,' are always already imagined and characterized as other. Universal health care and the daily manner in which biomedicine is practiced in southern Israel provides an avenue for examining the Jewish valences medicine carries in southern Israel, Israel's boundaries of inclusion, and the connection between biomedicine and secularism.

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