



Secular Rituals: How Nonreligious People Make Religion Less Religious

Thursday, October 17
4:00PM – 5:30PM
Royce 306

As more Americans become nonreligious, life-cycle rituals and other ceremonies that religious experts once performed are increasingly the responsibility of everyday people and ritual experts for hire. Very secular people avoid rituals or work hard to minimize their resemblance to religion. Secular people who have left strict religious groups often rebel by inverting the rituals they once felt obligated to perform, which also allows them to hang onto parts of themselves they continue to value. Most nonreligious people simply want weddings or memorial services that avoid God-talk and feel familiar, but not too religious. All of these ways of engaging in ritual tell a story about secularism's awkward relationship with religion and the strangeness of being secular. Drawing on several years of ethnographic research and discussing rituals as varied as a bat mitzvah, a Día de los Muertos celebration, and an inversion of Eid called Haramadan, this lecture describes how nonreligious people make religious rituals and practices feel more secular—and how in so doing they are changing what it means to be religious in America today.



Joseph Blankholm is an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His interdisciplinary research focuses on atheism and secularism, primarily in the United States. Most recently, he has published on Karl Marx's forgotten secularism (forthcoming in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*) and the contradictory ways in which American law understands secular people (*Public Culture* 2018). He is currently at work on a manuscript about organized nonbelievers and their ambivalent relationship with religion.