

BOOK REVIEWS

Jacoby, Susan. *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*. New York: Metropolitan, 2004.

“I trust that there is not a young man now living in the United States,” wrote Thomas Jefferson in a private letter in 1822, “who will not die an Unitarian.” Only four years before his death, the author of Virginia’s landmark Statute for Religious Freedoms clearly envisioned the nation’s path as one toward a Christianity based on reason rather than pure faith and denominational dogmatism.¹

Jefferson’s prediction was mistaken. Today most Americans are not Unitarians. In her important and timely new book, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, journalist Susan Jacoby grapples with the history of secular thought in the United States and the fate of Jefferson’s much heralded reason-based beliefs. By looking to the past, Jacoby attempts to illuminate contemporary debates about the proper role for religion in the public square. Her core argument is that secular thought formed the root origins of American democracy. Yet, she contends, this fact has been obscured. Freethinking secularists who attained significant influence on the nation and its direction often

have been vilified or otherwise veiled. In *Freethinkers* she therefore argues that it is “past time to restore secularism, and its noble and essential contributions at every stage of the American experiment, to its proper place in our nation’s historical memory” (11).

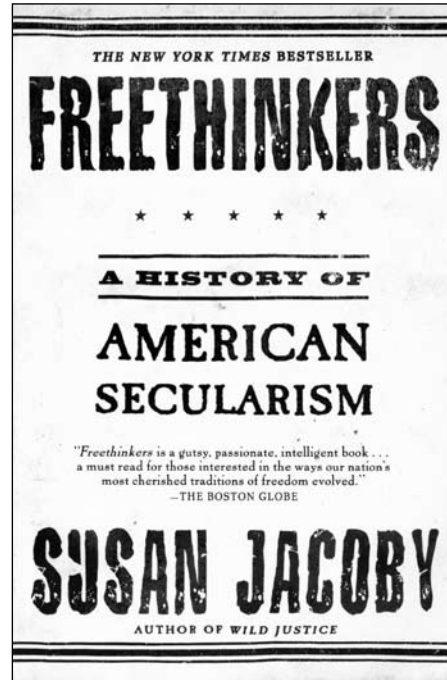
Freethinkers boldly enters into today’s turbulent debates over whether the American government has authentically Christian or secular origins. Often ideologically driven, answers to this driving question have been a long-standing feature of how Americans construct narratives about the nation and its path in the world. Since the providential account of George Bancroft in the nineteenth century, many histories of the United States have sought to establish that the nation had Christian roots that ought to endure. Contemporary works that attempt this project or seek to deny it are plentiful. Mark Noll and George Marsden assert that “Christian nation” arguments are overstated; efforts to find “belief” in founding texts represent a cherry picking of phrases that grossly distorts the nominally Christian rhetoric emerging from the deist and Enlightenment rationalist beliefs of many of the founding generation. Comparative religion scholar Diana Eck, in contrast, emphasizes culture. She asserts that the nation on the whole has

¹ Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Waterhouse, June 26, 1822, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984) 1458–9; Edwin S. Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 145–6. On Thomas Jefferson and civil religion, see also Thomas E. Buckley, S. J., “The Religious Rhetoric of Thomas Jefferson,” *The Founders on God and Government*, ed. Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark D. Hall, and Jeffrey H. Morrison (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004) 53–82. See also the forthcoming work of Johann Neem on Jefferson’s conception of religion and his philosophy of history.

always been Christian, yet what makes it unique today is not the persistent power of Christianity but, rather, the remarkable level of religious pluralism and tolerance across American society. Historian Nathan Hatch adds early politics to this pluralist position by arguing that there was a “democratization” of American Christianity from the earliest days of the Republic, which shaped the rise of the U.S. as a democratic Christian nation.²

Given the charged atmosphere in which these debates take place, Jacoby was wise to select “freethinkers” for her title. The term is powerful, if vague. It conjures up that most vaunted of American principles: “freedom”—freedom to think, to speak, to assemble, and to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. Secularists—a term which she uses interchangeably with freethinkers—pursue liberty-based goals, yet seem less noble somehow, as people of faith easily negate secularists and their views by portraying them as atheists and agnostics, as unprincipled, or simply as godless heathens.

“Freethinking” itself is a term derived from a phrase that first appeared in the late 1600s and flourished into a philosophical movement in the nineteenth century. The philosophy of “freethought” pivoted on the belief that judgments about religion should be based on reason and evidence from the natural world rather than on tradition, authority, or



received or revealed truths. According to Jacoby, freethinkers ran the gamut from the anti-religious to the devout. What they shared, she says,

regardless of their views on the existence or nonexistence of a divinity, was a rationalist approach to fundamental questions of earthly existence—a conviction that the affairs of human beings should be governed not by faith in the supernatural but by a reliance on reason and evidence adduced from the natural world. (4–5)

² See George Bancroft, *History of the United States, from the Discovery of the American Continent* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1834); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Now Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001); Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

The book opens with a telling anecdote about the present state of religious politics. President Bush chose Washington's Episcopal National Cathedral to issue an ecumenical address four days after the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Basing his words on the famous passage from Paul's Epistle to the Romans, President Bush consoled the nation by invoking religiously informed language while standing beside representatives of several major religions. This signaled a profound break from the tradition of separation of church and state, Jacoby informs her readers. Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Franklin Roosevelt would not and did not do such things (even after a direct attack on the United States).

With this as a springboard, *Freethinkers* moves from the revolutionary era through the present to chronicle the development of American secularism and explain how we "got here." Recovering this story is no mean feat. "The religiously correct version of American history," Jacoby proclaims, "has never given proper credit to the central importance of the Enlightenment concept of natural rights—or to the anti-clerical abolitionists who advanced that concept before the public—in building the case against slavery" (70).

Jacoby takes pains to demonstrate that a robust Enlightenment rationalism undergirded the objectives of many framers and signers of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. Having thrown off the chains of British rule, "Americans lived no longer in an age of faith," Jacoby contends, "but in an age of faiths and an age of reason" (34). As their model, the founders consciously

selected Virginia. It "is impossible to overstate the importance" of Virginia's 1786 Act for Establishing Religious Freedom because "much to the dismay of religious conservatives, it would become the template for the secularist provisions of the federal Constitution" (19). Many state constitutions commingled religion and government in the pre-Constitution period. Indeed, quite a few, such as Massachusetts, continued to uphold formal, established religions and oaths for public officials well after the ratification of the Constitution in 1788. However, these states were in the minority. Many members of the founding generation were concerned that "established" religions—even at the state level—would act to the detriment of the republic as a whole. Thus, "[w]ith its refusal to invoke any form of divine sanction, even the vaguely deistic 'Providence,'" Jacoby argues convincingly, "the Constitution went even further than Virginia's religious freedom act in separating religion from government" (29). To bind citizens within the nation, secular values seemed more likely to connect citizens than religious beliefs.

Developments such as crafting a Constitution without reference to God and enacting statutes of religious toleration did not represent unalloyed good done by those of the freethinking persuasion. "[S]ecularists are not value-free," Jacoby insists; "their values are simply grounded in earthly concerns rather than in anticipation of heavenly rewards or fear of infernal punishments" (10).

Jacoby recovers and sympathizes with the relatively forgotten lives and stories of the heroes of secular thought. Among those

in the pantheon are: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, suffragist and author of the “Woman’s Bible,” who said that “every form of religion which has breathed upon this earth has degraded woman”; Lucretia Mott, the ardent feminist whose personal motto was “truth for authority, not authority for truth”; William Lloyd Garrison, the famous abolitionist, for whom “truth is older than any parchment”; and Robert Green Ingersoll, the so-called “Great Agnostic,” who notably hoped that “we have retired the gods from politics. We have found that man is the only source of political power, and that the governed should govern.” Jacoby notes the subtle influence of freethought in the public expressions and actions of a diverse set of American luminaries such as Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Clarence Darrow, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and John F. Kennedy.

Freethought as a philosophy never fully sustained an organized movement in America, although Jacoby asserts that it “flowered into a genuine social and philosophical movement...fraught with ambivalence” (4). Freethinking was a way of looking at the world and making judgments about religion that is probably best understood as a cohesive cluster of ideas that can be only loosely defined as an intellectual movement. If there was a prime mover in the constellation of American freethinking stars, Jacoby concludes that it was Thomas Paine.

Paine, the renowned revolutionary, authored what became the American Revolution’s most iconic patriotic tract, *Common Sense*, which sold an astonishing 500,000 copies in the mid-1770s. Paine also penned the less well-known

and much maligned pamphlet *The Age of Reason*, published in 1794. This was no quixotic act, according to Jacoby. Paine attacked not only the ecclesiastical and monarchic hierarchies in *The Age of Reason*, but also religious beliefs of many kinds. He went on to propound a misguided expectation that “a revolution in the system of government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion” (35).

In perhaps the best chapter of the book, “The Great Agnostic and the Golden Age of Freethought,” Jacoby shows the importance of networks of newspapers, such as the *Truth Seeker*, founded in 1875, that rapidly became the nation’s best-known freethought organ. The influence of such papers was amplified by the audiences reached by an array of speakers, like Ingersoll, former abolitionists, suffragists, radicals, university professors, and labor activists—all of which helped to make freethought a viable belief system from 1875 through 1914. In this era “freedom of religion meant just that—the freedom to believe in and practice one’s creed. It did not mean that particular religious beliefs were exempt from public criticism or even from public ridicule” (172). Not many were moved to reject religion outright, but a good number seem to have been persuaded to make a case for a continued and strengthened secularist approach to public affairs.

An outstanding insight Jacoby develops from this period is to show the connections developing between atheists, socialists, and Darwinists around the turn of the twentieth century. What the five-time socialist candidate for president, Eugene Debs, had in common (apart from

agnosticism) with Ingersoll and Darrow was a “deep commitment to the liberties enumerated in the Bill of Rights” (180).

Yet in the years after World War I these connections were not enough. Freethought as any sort of coherent movement began to lose momentum. After the “golden age,” freethinkers worked toward achieving the secularization of American society through the instruments of the “procedural republic”: namely, juridical review and resolution, rather than direct legislation or lecture circuits. Jacoby deploys a host of post-Scopes legal battles over the establishment clause as her primary evidence of secular thought at work in the period leading up to the present, but she lacks the public figures and large-scale historical events to fully support her argument. The one major exception was Madalyn Murray O’Hair, who in the late 1950s and 1960s championed a high-profile cultural battle to remove prayer from public schools.

This narrow focus on freethinkers like Paine and lesser knowns such as Ingersoll is advantageous. It makes this narrative engaging and adds cohesion. But this methodology does not permit a wider view of the historical context in which Jacoby’s central individuals acted. Some of the “prominent” freethinkers were more marginalized than this account of their lives and actions would suggest. *Freethinkers* could stand more of what it calls for: a critical examination of what it means to be “secular” and to have an “influence” on society. To be prominent is not necessarily to be influential.

Jacoby seems to suggest that to be secular is to take a liberal political-philosophical

position. Yet particularly in the twentieth century, a number of prominent conservatives, such as political philosopher Leo Strauss, and those of other political stripes, such as the irascible journalist H. L. Mencken, have been both passionately conservative in their politics and also ardent non-believers. Jacoby also often casts devout believers as thoroughly conservative in their politics in the modern sense, yet in the past Social Gospel advocates such as Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch clearly do not conform to such a generalization. The civil rights movement is yet another example of the importance of religious values animating social change.

So, what values and strategies should secularists advocate today? Jacoby argues that the intellectual offspring of the freethinkers should learn from their forebears. If they want to change minds, contemporary secularists must move beyond the defense of a godless Constitution separating church and state. Beliefs cannot promote themselves: “Values are handed down more easily and thoroughly by permanent institutions than by marginalized radicals who, even if they change minds in their own generation—as the abolitionists did—are often subject to remarginalization in the next” (103). To sway hearts and minds, “secular humanists must reclaim passion and emotion from the religiously correct” (363). Overly rational arguments stand in sharp contrast to the successful faith-based emotional appeals of the current Bush administration, which “could hardly do more to demonstrate its commitment to pulverizing a constitutional wall that has served both religion and government well for more than two hundred years” (353).

Jacoby offers not only a historical challenge to those who believe God is and has always been part of American governance, but also a warning to secularists. She concludes that it is time to confront the

unexamined assumption that religion per se is, and always must be, a benign influence on society.... For secularists to mount an effective challenge to the basic premises of religious correctness, they must first stop pussyfooting around the issue of the harm that religion is capable of doing. (358)

We may not all be Unitarians, as Jefferson supposed. And there was no systemic religious revolution to go with government transformation, as Paine believed. But rationalist skepticism certainly is embedded in the fundamental mechanisms of American democracy and society. One thing is clear: a better sense of the importance of secularism in the past is essential if we are to enlighten our current public dialogue in the present. To this end, *Freethinkers* is a good place to start.

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Martin, David. *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory.* London: Ashgate, 2005.

David Martin has been one of the leading scholars of secularization theory since the 1960s. In his magnum opus, *A General Theory of Secularization* (1978), Martin laid out a careful historical sociology of secularization that maintained the limited and highly particularized nature of this cultural process. Even then he doubted that secularization would be inevitable or that secularism would become universal. For him, one of the key factors for understanding how religion fares in the modern world was “social differentiation,” or the increasing autonomy of social spheres. Social differentiation refers to the tendency in modern society for social spheres to be less and less integrated. For example, the separation of church and state is a fundamental manifestation of social differentiation in the modern world. This dynamic has played out differently in different societies, which is why one finds so much variation not only in the West, but also beyond to the rest of the world. To return to the example, the establishment of the Church of England in that country has no comparison in the United States; in Chile, a different balance altogether has been struck.

In his new work, *On Secularization*, Martin updates this theory through a compilation of articles and lectures that outline the directions in which he has moved since his general theory. Martin once again voices his skepticism towards secularization as grand narrative and

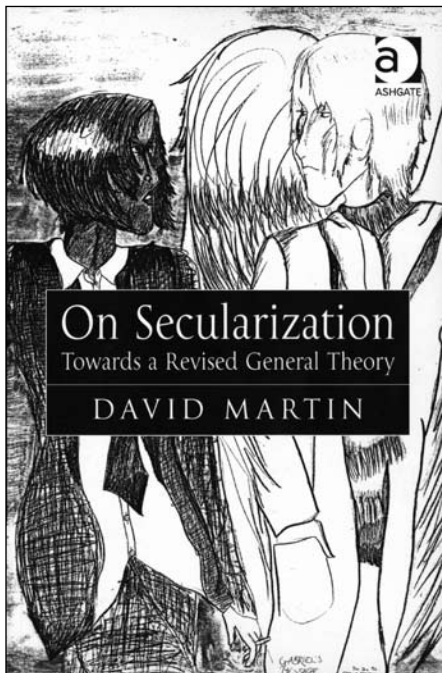
implicitly reiterates his argument that just as there are multiple modernities, there are also multiple secularizations. It is not that secularization theory is untrue, as he first argued in 1965; it simply manifests itself differently in different contexts. The dynamics of religion and modernity play out differently in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In Latin America and Turkey, for example, secularism does not translate from the elites to the masses. In the United States, secularity is anything but uniform, with elites and masses divided on the question of religion. Even in Europe—the one place where the traditional notion of secularization has seemed to be at work—there is great variation: secularity in Berlin and secularism in Paris look and feel different, because they are in fact different realities. Likewise, the mass migration of Muslims to Europe is changing the reli-

gio-cultural landscape of Europe in fundamental ways.

Even from casual observation, it is evident that religion has far from disappeared, and the fate of specific faith traditions remains far from clear. Of particular interest for Martin are Islam and Christianity and how one accounts for the differences between these faiths in their encounter with the modern world. Here, as in the rest of this book, Martin is more suggestive than systematic.

For example, Martin brings attention to the ways in which different religions mobilize believers. Islam enters the modern world collectively, “through the mobilization of whole populations”; Pentecostal Christianity, by contrast, enters it factionally and individually, “through the mobilization of subcultural and individual self-consciousness” (144). The latter, as Martin first demonstrated in *Tongues of Fire* (1990), helps to explain why Pentecostalism actually welcomes in and encourages the individualism and social differentiation of modernity.

To take another example, faiths vary by their implicit approach to pluralism—ranging from “voluntaristic” to “communal.” Communal pluralism is characterized by the interaction of homogenous communities with each other. The classic example of this is the acceptance of “religions of the book” by certain Islamic empires. Voluntaristic pluralism is most clearly understood as the “supermarket of beliefs,” with individuals respected for their capacity to choose. Like others, including Adam Seligman (*Modernity’s Wager*) and Charles Taylor (*Sources of the Self*), Martin argues that



voluntaristic pluralism is historically a product of Western Christianity.

The starkest differences between religions are seen in their various relationships to power. In Martin's conceptualization, this relationship is straightforward in Islam but paradoxical in Christianity. For Christians, a tension exists between the City of God and the City of Man. In other words, the "already" and the "not yet" of the kingdom of God have a profound impact on Christian, and derivatively Western, social and political thought, because social orders are derived from sacred orders. This paradox, which in Martin's theological understanding *should* exist between Christians and power, is fundamentally different than the triumphalism of Islam. To the extent that such a paradox is manifested in the West, there "surely is a clash of civilizations" (198).

And what are we to make of these religions in our increasingly globalized condition? While Martin does not answer this question conclusively, he does suggest the ways in which the twenty-first-century market culture will impact Christianity and Islam. Martin maintains that while religions are still sending out missionaries, the most efficient means of evangelism is simply for globetrotters to carry their message with them. This way of reproducing faith lines up very well with Christian individualistic mobilization. In fact, Christianity's main challenge in the modern world, according to Martin, is internal: "it is dangerously open-ended to a degree which threatens its own viability and ability to reproduce" (169). While Islam does not have this latter problem, the individualism of market

culture is potentially corrosive to Islam as Islam reproduces itself collectively; it remains to be seen what such communal mobilization will look like in our globalizing context.

A good book is in part measured by the degree to which it provokes questions. Martin's new book brings into relief some of the critical sociological questions about religion in our day. What sources of social cohesion are Europeans left with as religious sources continue to be weakened? What will the relationship of Islam to modernity become in different parts of the world? In what ways has secularization actually revitalized religious practice, opening up space for religious faith to be newly proclaimed? While Martin does not provide a systematic theory to address all of these questions, he does provide critical concepts and insights for scholars of religion to grapple with such questions in the future.

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