

Schmidt, Leigh Eric. *The Church of Saint Thomas Paine: A Religious History of American Secularism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. xvi + 248 pages. Hardcover, \$27.95.

This study endeavors to tell the story of those individuals and groups who sought to establish a new brand of secularism—one which would fill the middle ground between believers and non-believers while exhibiting features akin to religious organizations—from the outset of the nineteenth century up to contemporary times.

Author Leigh Eric Schmidt currently serves on the faculty of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, and previously chaired the Department of Religion at Princeton University. The present book continues his research on topics associated with American religion and culture.

The book's alignment includes a Preface, an Introduction, three chapters, and an Epilogue. In the Preface, Schmidt states that the "book offers a history of those liberal secularists who courted religion, often with forthright ardor and hopeful anticipation, frequently with poetic license and unresolved ambivalence" (xii.) He reminds the reader that secularists themselves have historically been comprised of several groups, such as atheists, freethinkers, and humanists, and that liberals within that universe are in a distinct minority. In the Introduction, the author identifies the etiology of liberal secularism in the nineteenth century and how it would utilize certain components of religion—"relics," rituals, and non-traditional churches—only to be attacked by secular purists and modern conservatives alike.

Chapter 1 depicts the manner by which American founding father Thomas Paine served as a model for liberal secularists due to his views on religion, for which he had been criticized and abandoned by the country he helped become free. Following a robbing of Paine's remains by a British radical in 1819, a centuries-long mystery started over the true location and holder of them. Various persons claimed to have something attributed to Paine, whether his skull or a

small part of his brain. Meanwhile, various persons and groups began to honor Paine in various ways. For instance, a monument was built in his honor in New Rochelle, NY; his birthday was an occasion for celebrations, and a Thomas Paine National Historical Association was created. Even as their hero gave them hope for a universal form of religious secularism, parochial differences among liberal secularists diminished original aspirations, according to the author.

Chapter 2 collects a plethora of examples of how liberal secularists created and promoted non-religious rites for funerals and internment. Courtlandt Palmer, a wealthy resident of New York City made a specific plea for secular ritualism in 1881, contending that for it to really impact people, “it would need to replace Christianity’s richly elaborated liturgies with humanistic ceremonies that were equally solemn and affective” (p, 72). Others, including British freethinker G.W. Foote and physician-pharmacist A.R. Ayres developed secular rites for funerals and internments, while New York freethinker George Pratt called for an organization to conduct such activities. Schmidt observes that such secular funeral ceremonies continued into the twentieth century.

In Chapter 3, Schmit furnishes several examples of individuals or groups who sought to create church-like establishments. For instance, he mentions Caroline Bartlett, a young minister who led a Kalamazoo, Michigan, organization called the People’s Church. Pastor Octavius Brooks Frothingham created the Independent Liberal Church. Free Religious Association leader Felix Adler promoted the Society for Ethical Culture in New York as filling a void for those who eschewed traditional worship venues. M.M. Mangasarian, a minister who left traditional religious denominations, established the Independent Religious Society (Rationalist) and lectured to secular congregations. Schmidt describes other church-like organizations and religious societies being created in states like Oregon, Kansas, and Missouri.

In the Epilogue, Schmidt assesses secular achievements in the twentieth century. Whereas legal victories from 1957 to 1963 buoyed secularists, the blowback by conservative groups put them back on the defensive. The religious-secular split even came up in the 1984 presidential campaign due to a controversy involving Walter Mondale's brother. By the time the twenty-first century dawned, secularists were depressed about the future. But Schmidt identifies the goal of interfaith atheist Chris Stedman, whose 2012 memoir called for a new "brand" of secularism, one which would avoid dichotomies and build bridges to traditional religious groups.

While Schmidt's explication of a religious form of secularism is unique, other recent studies have analyzed contemporary aspects of secularism. These include books by Susan Jacoby in 2004, Phil Zuckerman in 2015, Christopher Cameron in 2019, and Charles McCray in 2022. Two 2023 offerings, by Kate Cohen and Eduard Honey, highlight atheism, though the latter author uses the book title to remind the reader that atheism is not a religion.

On the positive side, Schmidt's study taps many primary documents from prestigious libraries around the nation and does a fine job of referencing notes at the end. The chapter depicting the search for Thomas Paine's remains is simultaneously funny and frightening, and the story about Courtlandt Palmer's family lamenting his secular funeral after the fact is a lesson to get the family on board for such occasions.

However, the book's organization is periodically faulty, with material not presented in sequential order, and the black-and-white illustrations are rudimentary. The content is top-heavy on the nineteenth century. The most glaring deficiency is the lack of a full, comprehensive definition of religion from which the secularists can be measured. There are religious features beyond relics, rituals, and churches that need to be identified and weighed before an accurate long-term conclusion can be drawn. With a valid framework for religion

itself, Schmidt—and other interested scholars—may find evidence that contradicts the “splinter groups” depiction of secularists and their historical influence.

References

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