thousands of young Africans became his students, some of whom became prominent intellectuals like D. D. T. Jabavu and Z. K. Matthews. Although a committed teacher Roberts led a double life. During the nights he observed phenomena in the southern sky which made him a well-known figure in international astronomy. As he approached the end of his teaching career he also retired from astronomy and began a second career as a politician. When he joined the South African Senate, the Native Affairs Commission and other institutions the basic weakness of the old-fashioned liberalism which he represented quickly became apparent. He proved to be something of a turncoat and supported segregationist policies although he privately rejected them. This damaged his prestige among Africans who regarded him as a political failure. Snedegar does not hide his critical attitude and provides a portrait that shows Roberts's weaknesses and limitations. His study is a welcome addition to the complex history of South Africa liberalism, but at least as much a contribution to the history of education and the historiography of knowledge and science.

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Village atheists. How America's unbelievers made their way in a godly nation. By Leigh Eric Schmidt. Pp. xxii + 337 incl. 60 figs. Princeton–Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2016. £24.95. 978 06 91168647

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The symbiotic relationship between American religiosity and secularity is on full display in Leigh Schmidt's second historical monograph on late nineteenth-century free thought, the era of the atheist savant Robert Ingersoll and the moral crusader Anthony Comstock. Although theism, particularly a belief in the God of socially respectable Protestants, ultimately remained a cornerstone of American civic life, the decades following the Civil War witnessed a 'rough-edged' resistance spearheaded by the 'agnostics, infidels, and freethinkers' inhabiting *Truth Seeker* magazine and the National Liberal League. Schmidt, a public historian of American religion based at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics in St Louis, presents four chapter-length profiles of 'flesh and blood freethinkers' who offer a 'quotidian', 'grassroots' corrective to an historiography overly enamoured with Ingersoll and ideas. This lived irreligion approach, based primarily upon lay periodicals and popular literature published between 1860 and 1890, challenges neat narratives of linear progress. As portrayed, Schmidt's subjects embodied the 'relational interdependence and volatility' (p. 20) that have marked the ongoing battle between secularisation and Christianisation.

Schmidt begins with Samuel Putnam, whose 1891 autobiography, *My religious experience*, chronicled his winding journey as a self-described 'secular pilgrim' away from the austere, New England Calvinism of his youth. The anti-Bunyan, Putnam's progress to unbelief began through his university reading of romantic and transcendentalist literature, which inclined him to affect over intellect. A sentimental vision of Jesus on a Civil War battlefield restored the young man's Christian commitment – but, this time, to the loving, liberal-Protestant God of

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Horace Bushnell. He held various 'hinterland' pastorates (Congregational then Unitarian) thereafter, until his increasing interaction with free thought – and, finally, a romantic scandal – drove the 'disillusioned sentimentalist' to desert his wife, children and theism altogether in 1880. Relocating to New York City, Putnam's rising esteem as a novelist and National Liberal League organiser declined posthumously, when rumours of 'free love and whiskey' prompted former colleagues to disparage his character. Schmidt cites this chagrin, as well as Putnam's autobiographical silence on his own sexual impropriety, to emphasise mainstream freethinkers' concern to uphold traditional morality.

Portrait two features the Ohioan Watson Hestin, a cantankerous, struggling, small-town artist who attained renown through his 'secular iconography'. In 1885 *Truth Seeker*, popular freethought's house organ, debuted Heston's sardonic cartoons (over fifty reproduced in the book), which lambasted regressive priestcraft while still touting common prejudices. For example, although Hestin pilloried clerical support for slavery and patriarchy, he also recapitulated stereotypes of African-Americans as servants of religious superstition and the ideal woman as a homemaker. The cartoonist's career, Schmidt concedes, aligned with late 1800s atheism – inarguably a 'white man's club' little interested in racial equality or women's suffrage. Sociology aside, when Hestin roasted Mormons for polygamy, the editor of *Truth Seeker*, D. M. Bennett, sided with readers who objected to the inconsistent application of religious liberty. Against Establishment Protestantism and papist Catholicism, sectarians and secularists often invoked the same national credo: Jeffersonian freedom of conscience.

In Schmidt's interpretation, the democratic 'shared principles' uniting 'most American Christians' with dissenters (p. 202) helped to explain the successful career of C. B. Reynolds. After the New Yorker's conversion to unbelief in 1883, the former Seventh Day Adventist preacher channeled his nonconformist, revivalist energies into headlining big-tent debates between freethinkers and Christians. His 'practical' knack for obtaining grassroots support fostered surprising civility at most debate stops, exemplified by the joint, Baptist-freethinker funeral organised for one ally's son. In 1879 Anthony Comstock, the censorious US Postal Service Inspector and founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, brandished Reynolds's *Blasphemy and the Bible* pamphlet to secure a heresy conviction. Yet it was Reynolds's lawyer, the silver-tongued Ingersoll, who transfixed the courtroom in his plea for character, not creed, to determine an individual's reputation. Schmidt contends that neither free speech nor Christian authoritarianism triumphed in the Jersey Heresy Case. Instead of duelling legends, he calls for a nuanced legacy recognising Reynolds as a teetotalling, Scripture-citing, atheist evangelist. Indeed, the 'persistently religious textures of his secularism' (p. 173) are hard to ignore.

The 1887 'obscenity' conviction of the New York-born marriage reformer Elmina Slenker is Schmidt's key exhibit of the sexual politics plaguing freethought. Roundly reviled, the '*female* atheist' violated the 'divine order'; they also contested the 'hyper-masculinity of the atheist assault on pious femininity baked into the movement' (p. 247). After Slenker publicly declared her unbelief in 1856, her sexually frank writings triggered vociferous opposition, prompting *Truth Seeker*'s editorial condemnation and even temporary abandonment by her husband.

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Most freethinkers – Ingersoll included – sedulously avoided association with 'obscenity'. Memorialised as 'Aunt Elmina', 'Mother of Liberalism', Slenker softened some critics through a carefully crafted image of domesticity, as seen in her household advice, romantic novels and children's literature. Comstock's mission to paint freethinkers as 'free-lusters' targeted prominent male atheists, too. In 1879 the zealot finally apprehended his arch-foe Bennet, the 'infidel *par excellence*' and quintessential *Truth Seeker*.

Through these four, often-intersecting vignettes, Schmidt presents a compelling cultural history from the grassroots (of white, mostly north-eastern America). The even-handed profiles 'tell [unbelievers'] stories' without neglecting their biases, inconsistencies and striking conventionality. Indeed, whether through pilgrimage, liberal Protestantism, freedom of conscience, revivalism or feminine domesticity, Schmidt's non-conformists clearly negotiated their place in a Christianised society through its religious tropes and popular mores. The humanising, narrative approach serves the public intellectual's objective to reach broad, non-specialist audiences. Admirably attentive to fresh primary sources, the text lacks sustained engagement with secondary literature and theoretical implications. Regarding the latter, how do Schmidt's characters – purported models of a distinctly American, 'democratic secularism' (p. 55) – relate to the study of secularisation worldwide?

Closing with an epilogue rather than a conclusion, Schmidt explores American unbelief's subsequent, peaks-and-valleys trajectory. During the Cold War, when the mainline establishment ceded popular support to Evangelical Protestantism, an invigorated, galvanised secularist movement pursued – and won – landmark rulings against prayers and Bible-reading in public schools, developments still challenged in the courts of law and popular opinion. Taking a long view from the late 1800s, Schmidt convincingly depicts American secularism and theism as perennially intersecting movements grounded in the same cultural soil.

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Damning words. The life and religious times of H. L. Mencken. By D. G. Hart (foreword Mark A. Noll). (Library of Religious Biography.) Pp. xiv + 259 incl. 7 ills. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016. £18.99. 978 0 8028 7344 6

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D. G. Hart has, and acknowledges, a problem which is introduced in a question on the first page of this biographical study. Posing it is the editor of the series in which it appears, the premier historian of American religion, Mark A. Noll: 'Whatever in the world could lead the Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company … to sponsor a volume on H. L. Mencken in a series of religious biographies?' And, he also asks, what would possess Darryl Hart, who has authored several worthy books 'on the virtues of historical Calvinism', to think that anyone could be interested in a religious biography of H. L. Mencken, who is known most 'for his *assaults* on the Christian faith?'

Compounding the problems which these two historians acknowledge is Hart's accurate assessment that H. L. Mencken 'remains a figure on the margins', whom he treats as a fading and, indeed, a faded character on the American religious

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