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BOOK REVIEWS

Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism and Community in America. By Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 196. $27.95 (cloth). ISBN: 9780199986323.

In *Atheist Awakening*, Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith offer a sociological account of a politicized and increasingly organized movement of those in the United States who object to or abstain from religion. The "awakening" of the title references the great awakenings of religious fervor among American Christians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Cimino and Smith argue that the last three decades have seen another such "awakening"—a growth in fervor, commitment, mobilization, and public engagement—in this case, among American nonbelievers. Interestingly, this growth in activism is not driven by numerical growth, as "[a] sober examination of the rate of nonbelievers does not show a dramatic increase of atheists over the past two decades" (2). Rather, what is different today is the active, vocal, and organized presence of nonbelievers in the public square. Cimino and Smith illustrate this point by comparing the 2012 Reason Rally held on the National Mall in Washington, DC, with a similar event, the "Godless March on Washington," held ten years earlier. The 2012 event brought more than 10,000 people to the National Mall (with organizers often citing the higher estimate of 20,000), while the 2002 event attracted a mere 2,500 people (38). But the difference is not only in the number of active participants at these events. The authors describe the 2002 march as "marked by considerable disunity among the various secularist groups," while "[i]n 2012, secularists were united enough to bring the major groups together" (2). If there are not more atheists among the American public, why are so many more atheists going public? What is leading the nonreligious to greater organization and unity in the past two to three decades? These questions compel Cimino and Smith to an examination of the foundations and forms of the new atheist awakening. They pursue these questions through participant observation at secularist meetings and events, qualitative interviews, online surveys, and textual analysis of books, periodicals, and online publications produced by secularist authors and organizations (9).

Their answer, in short, is "the increasing public—often political—presence of religion" (3). As the once popular belief (at last in certain circles) that religion in modern societies would inevitably decline and possibly disappear altogether in favor of rationalist, empirical worldviews has not been borne out over time, those who would favor such a development must reassess their role as political actors in a world of contested beliefs. Furthermore, not only has religion maintained a visible and significant role in global society, but forms of religious expression and action emerged in the twentieth century, especially the late twentieth century, that directly challenged the nature and role of purportedly secular institutions, including the state. Even more fundamentally there is a way in which belief and nonbelief are mutually constructed and dependent. As Martin Marty writes of Cimino and Smith's thesis in the foreword, "believers and nonbelievers exist[] in symbiotic relationships. If the nonbelievers need believers for the fashioning of their own identity, believers often find a need that nonbelievers satisfy. Both camps find it easier to define their beliefs and their social forms when the other is vital" (xi–xii). This relationship may come as no surprise following the work that has been done by scholars, such as Talal Asad, who argue that the secular is not a category outside of the religious but instead a phenomenon inseparable from religion, and likewise for the category of religion. (See Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003], 191–92).

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Interestingly, what emerges from Cimino and Smith's sociological account of the atheist awakening is not an ideologically homogenous movement reacting to the American religio-political landscape of the twenty-first century. Rather, what is most helpful about Cimino and Smith's treatment of the emerging secularist movement is their careful attention to the simultaneous processes of unity and discord, and organization and dissent. Such tensions are not new among nonbelievers, as Cimino and Smith discuss in the first chapter's brief section on the distinct genealogies of religious humanism, secular humanism, and atheism (18–21). There is a long-standing set of disagreements among nonbelievers over borrowing religious language and religiously inspired practice versus rejecting all religious forms; the importance of developing a positive system of humanist ethics and philosophy versus emphasizing the wrongness of religious belief; and the soft sell of seeking cooperation and common ground with religion versus the hard sell of distancing and condemning religion. Cimino and Smith also note throughout the book that American atheism, in its rejection of corporate belief and emphasis on the virtue of intellectual honesty, tends to attract persons with strong independent and individualist personalities—a tendency that can pose problems for organizing and movement building (see, for example, 4, 22, 80–81, 106–07, 139). The attention to the simultaneous processes of unity and discord, and organization and dissent nuances the short answer to the question of why there is an atheist awakening at this moment in history: it may be driven by the increasing public and political role of religion, but, Cimino and Smith argue, it is made possible and sustained by other factors.

In chapter 1 Cimino and Smith address the creation of secularist identities in response to public religion and the organizations that have grown up around those identities. They identify three strategies by which secularist organizations seek to survive and grow:

> First, they are competing and positioning themselves to attract "secular seekers," who are similar to spiritual seekers or "questers" in their persistent search for authentic communities of meaning while remaining highly individualistic. Second, they have borrowed elements from their main antagonists—evangelical Protestants—in defining themselves and rallying others to their cause. Third, they have taken up minority discourse and identity politics in pressing for group rights and equal treatment in society. (22; citation omitted)

In this chapter, Cimino and Smith highlight a tension between, on the one hand, a quasi-eschatological faith in the coming victory of science and rationality over religion and superstition; and, on the other hand, an identity politics that portrays American secularists as a marginalized and persecuted minority. The authors describe how different organizations have approached these two aspects of being nonreligious in America, thus introducing readers to the evolving institutional infrastructures of the secularist movement.

Chapter 2 introduces one of the factors that makes this moment in history a compelling one for an atheist awakening: the new atheism. For Cimino and Smith, the writings and public profile of "new atheist" leaders such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris represent a rallying point for secularists while also spurring dissent and discussion within secularist circles. The work of these authors gives secularists, "an open-ended project with which to identify, creating a shared vision, even if the messages of each individual author vary," while also "[c]reating a general vernacular and a broadly accepted set of ideas [that] helps temper sectarian tendencies among highly individualist secularists and provides them with a base of general interest" (67). Cimino and Smith argue that the new atheists, much like the revivalists of the nineteenth century, have raised the public profile of secularist movements; provided these movements with a general canon and discursive framework for articulating and debating their beliefs

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and messages; and expressed a set of critical norms that positions secularist movements and ideas relative to the wider society and culture (83).

In chapter 3 they examine new modes of communication and organizing among secularists, and especially the role that the Internet has played in facilitating a more organized and more active secularist movement. Like many other minority social movements, secularists have found the low entry cost and democratic nature of the Internet to be a powerful tool in connecting otherwise isolated individuals and groups. And, as with other social and political movements, the Internet has led to more grassroots, bottom-up organizing among a group whose messages and political actions were previously mediated through a relatively small number of institutions (108). The Internet has thus enhanced communication and made possible greater mobilization, but it has also proliferated disagreements. Or, as Cimino and Smith say, "All of this suggests patterns of mobilization and countermobilization as well as internal boundary marking, as secular activists and secularist organizations seek to distinguish and promote their particular brand of secular activism or organization from others within the same milieu or movement" (95; citation omitted).

Finally, in chapter 4 Cimino and Smith turn to how the secularist movement is creating forms of memorialization, commemoration, and rituals of social belonging. These include secularist alternatives for weddings, funerals, and weekly "liturgies"; modes and spaces of social belonging, such as protest gatherings and rallies; and commemoration days, such as Darwin Day. Such practices are important, but controversial, within secularist groups and forums. Even if the content of such practices is vehemently secular, their ritual form is tied too closely to what many in the movement who want to jettison religion entirely see as the superstitious trappings of religion (see, for example, 143). Here more than anywhere else, disagreements about the purpose of secularist institutions—let alone a "positive secularist movement" that offers the functional equivalent of religion's psychosocial support and fulfillment for its members—come to the fore. Cimino and Smith contend that many secularists joining the movement are looking for a sense of community and belonging—a shared social experience that tends toward forms of ritual and commemoration (144). But individual and organizational conflicts on this point also indicate that the movement is many things to many people: a shared intellectual position; a political movement for social acceptance; a social-cultural alternative to religious community; and more. Some of these understandings of the movement are mutually reinforcing, but others are in tension.

While the authors' careful attention to the competing dynamics of unity and discord, and organization and dissent is one of this book's greatest strengths, it also presents one of the greatest challenges facing analysts of secularist movements and ideologies. The disagreements between different organizations and perspectives on the nature and role of nonbelief are so strident, at times, that one is left to wonder whether this "movement" is cohesive enough to be described as such. Is sharing a lack of belief in god or religion enough to hold together these organizations and their constituents? Cimino and Smith are aware of this dynamic, as they note in the chapter on the new atheism: "Overall, insiders and outsiders alike should be cautious about drawing the conclusion that the new atheist phenomenon is having a negative impact. Internal debates are part and parcel of more secularist voices coming to the fore, not necessarily evidence of fragmentation" (77). Social movements are inevitably marked by both unity of purpose and internal dissent. But this movement's disagreements run so deep, and its goals and strategies are so variant, if not at odds, that one cannot help but wonder whether the phenomena described in this book actually amount to a "movement."

The authors note some of the recent scholarship on secularism, such as that by Charles Taylor and Talal Asad (8), but they consciously choose not to engage it. Their goal instead is a focus on "secularity as an intentional and organized movement with its own identity and strategies for

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creating a more secular America and defending its interests" (9). The decision not to interrogate the category of the secular, however, obscures consequential differences in secularist groups' political philosophies and their potential effects on political spheres. As the authors note at one point, "the secularist landscape is highly pluralistic, made up of multiple groups and subgroups, consisting of individuals holding diverse ideas and philosophies as well as divergent definitions of secularity and their own individual secularist self-identity" (106). While Cimino and Smith acknowledge these differences on the question of what "secularism" or "secularity" is or should be, they do not interrogate how such differences unfold into conceptions of the public square and the proper boundaries of participation therein. For example, the secularism of some secular humanist groups, which seeks equal footing for nonreligion in a tolerant and pluralistic society, is conceptually (and strategically) distinct from the secularism of new atheism, which seeks the dominance of a secularist ideology at the expense of religious ideologies. So, on the one hand there may be a common denominator in the effort to create a space of greater acceptance for nonbelief in an otherwise overwhelmingly religious society, but how that space is created and what it means for the expectations of public discourse may be very different. Insofar as the atheist awakening is a political awakening and not just a sort of anti-spiritual revival, these distinctions matter.

Notwithstanding these concerns, Cimino and Smith have provided an informative and nuanced entry into what they convincingly argue is a segment of American society that is increasingly active and vocal in pursuit of its political status and interests. The recent history of law and religion is bound up, in many ways, with the decline of the secularization thesis and the emergence of new forms of politicized religion. Cimino and Smith's work shows that these religious movements have a counterpart in nonreligious, atheist, and secularist movements. The more stridently politicized religions sound in the legal and political spheres, the more organized and vehement will be the countervailing voices of secularist movements. As scholars increasingly challenge the givenness of secularization, it is important to remember that there are individuals and organizations for whom such a reality is a call to action. As they expand their activism on behalf of secularist causes—whether for nondiscrimination, separation of religion and state, or the political and cultural dominance of a secular ideology—these movements will be just as important to the study of law and religion as are their religious counterparts.

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