

Secularizing America

A review of
*The Secular Revolution:
Power, Interests, and
Conflict in the Secularization
of American Public Life*
Edited by Christian Smith
University of California
Press, Berkeley, 2003

Lael Weinberger

Probably everyone with more than a passing interest in apologetics has given some thought to the widespread secularization of the Western World, and why and how it came about. For years, the sociologists in mainstream academia have been fairly united in their opinion on the subject. In the recent book *The Secular Revolution*, Christian Smith, sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, sounds a note of dissent, and presents a new scholarly approach to secularization theory. He lays out a framework for reworking this field of sociology in his substantial opening chapter, and then other sociologists apply this approach in a number of case studies in American life.

The problem

Smith's first chapter is the most important (and with a length of 96 pages, is the largest in the book). Smith first reviews the standard account of secularization theory, developed by founding fathers of sociology such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. The traditional account views religion as declining proportionally to increases in modernization. Smith counters that this analysis does not explain anything about the 'why', 'how' and 'whom' of secularization:

"Differentiation", "modernization", "rationalization", "pluralization", and so on try to depict something that happened, but they do very little to tell us who

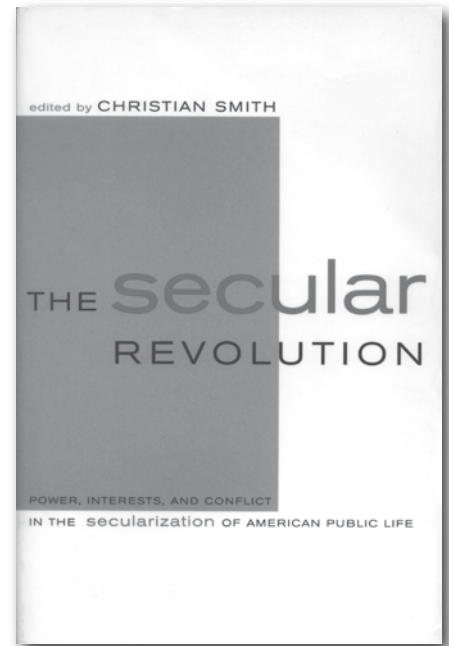
made it happen, why they made it happen, and how they made it happen' (p. 29).

The traditional secularization theorists give us an 'assertion about, not an explanation of secularization' (p. 22). 'Exactly why did urbanization or technological developments have to undermine religious authority?' (p. 23). Smith hits hard at the tendency of other secularization theorists to present the decline of religion as 'inevitable' in modern society. 'Rather than all nodding our scholarly heads together in what could be premature analytical closure, we need to go back and force ourselves to answer these questions again' (p. 23).

New approach

To replace the old view, Smith suggests a framework of a revolution for understanding secularization. This brings into the picture what is 'fatally missing from the traditional theoretical accounts of secularization', namely, 'agency, interests, mobilization, alliances, resources, organizations, power, and strategy' (p. 29). Secularization was not a deterministic process, but rather was the result of power struggles and intentional planning which took place to effect a 'regime change'. Smith lists ten areas which could serve as a starting point for understanding secularization, starting with determining who the activists were, and then studying their motivation, ideologies, opportunities, and so on (pp. 30–32).

Smith surveys the first few areas on his list at some length. Keep in mind, the inquiry in this book is limited to secularization in America. European and Australasian secularization obviously require their own analyses. Smith's goal in the first chapter is primarily to make the case for the new theoretical framework. The detailed case studies in different areas of 'public life' comprise the rest of the book, but we can get a good summary of them by looking at Smith's chapter one outline.



The activists

First, who were the activists? Smith argues that, 'The people at the core of these secularizing movements ... knew what they were doing, and they wanted to do it' (p. 33). They were almost all 'intellectual elites' belonging to the 'American knowledge class—the academic, scientific, and literary intelligentsia of their day' (p. 33).

Second, what motivated these activists? Smith argues that the secularizers were intellectual heirs of the humanistic 'enlightenment', the anti-religious line of the intellectual tradition, whose upward mobility in academia and the scientific and literary fields was impeded by the Protestant establishment (pp. 37, 48–53). Since the power of intellectuals is exerted through their authoritative status in knowledge production, the secularists needed to unseat the religious mainstream to be heard (p. 38). The secularists did this both to promote their ideologies and to strengthen their own job security.

Smith does not argue that all secularizers were personally antagonistic to religion, but he does argue that all had an interest, for one reason or another, in disestablishing religion's authority in public life (p. 47–48). For example, Protestant educational leaders themselves suggested reductions

in Christian teaching, and even Bible reading in some cases, in public schools (ch. 3). They had no problem with Christian teaching; it was just that they feared Catholics would request to teach Catholic doctrines!

Third, what was the cultural and ideological framework that the activists worked in? Nineteenth-century American intellectuals tended to idolise their European counterparts, so Smith argues that intellectual ‘peer pressure’ led them to accept European ideologies (such as naturalism and social evolution).

Fourth, what political situations furthered the secularist agenda? A major factor that Smith discusses was the divided Christian community. For example, the Protestant mainstream had alienated potential allies in America’s rapidly increasing Catholic population. And the ‘mainstream’ denominationalism—rife with splits, new denominations, and internal friction—was unable to provide a united front to oppose secularizers during the key era of conflicts (c. 1870–1940).

Finally, what resources did the secularizers have? Smith argues that a key here were the funds donated by big business tycoons to create research universities. By their emphasizing science education and research over older liberal arts subjects, religion was increasingly marginalized. Of course, science education and research are not anti-religious in themselves, but the point here is that theological professorships lost funding, while science departments in the universities (subject to the secularizing influences mentioned above) increased in funding.

Case studies

Each case study emphasizes points of Smith’s outline, but because the subject matter of each chapter is rather specialized, I will not attempt a summary. For example, the first chapter of the case studies (by Smith himself) is on the influence of early American sociologists in secularizing the American university’s approach to that subject matter. The subjects of the other studies are the destruction of moral reform politics, the secularizing

of the legal field and journalism, and even psychology’s secularizing influence on religion itself. There are two chapters on American public education, one studying the ‘progressive’ school reformers, and another on the influential teachers’ union, the National Education Association (NEA). Most of these chapters chronicle the period from 1870 to 1940 or some narrower time slot within that range, except for the last chapter, which covers the secularizing of bioethics debates from the 1950s to the 1980s.

One case study, ‘The positivist attack on Baconian science and religious knowledge in the 1870s’, should be of particular interest to readers of this journal. This chapter, adapted from the author’s doctoral dissertation at Princeton, focuses on a very specific confrontation: the positivist attack on the objective meaning of language. This in turn led to a criticism of the authority of any religious text (specifically, the Bible). Baconian science left a very permeable division between science and other disciplines, but with the deconstruction of meaning in words, scientists increasingly excluded the input of theology into science.¹

Their argument basically amounted to an assertion that science provided a superior epistemological (theory of knowledge) foundation to revelation. The chapter’s author, Eva Garroutte, argues that this approach to the science-religion debate resulted in great advances to the secularists by undermining the subtle, taken-for-granted assumptions of the Christians (pp. 212–213). As in any case where the field is extremely narrow, there is probably some inadvertent exaggeration of the overall historical importance of the topic, but it is an interesting topic which is often overlooked in studies of science and religion. It is also fascinating to read in light of the fact that we have seen, over the past decade or so, some increased interest in mounting an epistemological attack against secular naturalism.²

Apologetic value

In my view, the most important aspect of this book is not the individual

case studies, but rather, the theoretical direction of this book. By presenting a careful and scholarly sociological framework to replace traditional secularization theory, *The Secular Revolution* has (inadvertently) rendered a valuable service to Christian apologetics. Traditional secularization theory has for too long been presenting secularization as an inevitable process accompanying modernization, and as Smith points out,

‘Consequently, the *de facto* contemporary situation of religion in public life becomes regarded as natural and unavoidable, undermining any real sense of available alternatives or responsible choice’ (p. 16).

By presenting a secular public sphere as normative, the old theory has been a form of apologetics for secularism. Smith is aware of the tendency here: ‘... some able critics have suggested that academic secularization theory itself functions as a pro-secular ideology veiled in scientific garb’ (p. 23).

The writers of *The Secular Revolution* do not show partisanship for religious interests; on the contrary, some of them give the impression that the secularists rightfully won out in certain cases. Still, the focus is on how the *specific* arguments of certain secularizers won out in a *specific* time and place over *specific* arguments of certain Christians. This is a victory for clear historical understanding, which does not confuse the rightness of arguments in historical confrontations with the ultimate rightness or wrongness of Christianity and secularism. In short, *The Secular Revolution* clears up some of the historical and sociological bias against religion that is common in our highly secularized academia.³

A technical presentation

Unfortunately, *The Secular Revolution* will probably have a much more limited readership than its subject matter deserves. The technical terminology and length will keep this book off the ‘best-seller’ list, and the case studies are highly specific in the subject matter they cover.

For example, the chapter on psychology's impact on religion focuses in on one specific popular Christian journal (the liberal *Christian Century*), analyzes its contents over 40 years, and chronicles the progress psychology had made in watering down elements of biblical orthodoxy into a religiously-generated psychological experience. Certainly, the theme of the chapter is very important, but the reader will have to be very interested indeed to read through all the details on the development of a journal.

Still, since we can always benefit from learning of the winning and losing strategies, arguments, and tactics of the past, each chapter provides valuable insights relevant beyond the subject areas specifically covered. Limited readership is the price that is paid for a careful scholarly work written by and for the practitioners of an academic discipline. And it is just such a book that is needed to begin a revolution of sorts within sociology by overturning the entrenched old secularization theories.

References

1. Nineteenth-century American Christians had integrated Baconian views of science and rationality neatly into their understanding of the relationship between science and religion, little realizing that Bacon's basic philosophical approach undermined the authority of Scripture. See Sarfati, J. and Wieland, C., Culture wars: Bacon vs. Ham, Part 1, *Creation* 25(1):46–48, 2002. Garrouette's analysis bears out the fact that Baconianism effectively crippled the Christian response to the secularists, because Christians were not operating on a presuppositionally biblical foundation.
2. See for example Plantinga, A., *Warrant and Proper Function*, Oxford University Press, New York, ch. 12, 1993.
3. In this respect, this volume is complementary to several other works, covering different time periods, which were recently reviewed in this journal: for example, see Williams, A., The biblical origins of science: a review of *For the Glory of God* by Rodney Stark, *Journal of Creation* 18(2):49–52, 2004; also see Hardaway, B. and Sarfati, J., Countering Christophobia: a review of *Christianity on Trial* by Vincent Carroll and David Shiffrit, *Journal of Creation* 18(3):28–30, 2004.

Taking firm hold on an illusion

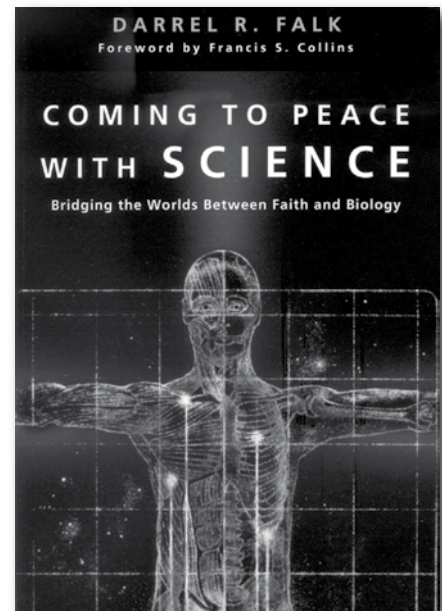
A review of
*Coming to Peace with
Science
Bridging the Worlds
Between Faith and
Biology*
Darrel R. Falk
InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL,
2004

Alex Williams

Falk argues from his personal journey as a biologist and professing evangelical Christian that only science, not Scripture, can reveal the details of creation. Evangelical Christians must therefore reinterpret Genesis to be consistent with long-age theistic evolution. There is nothing new in this book, yet Falk writes as if he is breaking new ground—he appears to have not researched the field! Fundamental errors, omissions and contradictions confound the book's message to the point that one has to question the competence not only of the author but also the publisher. Such comprehensive ignorance on an issue so important to the Christian faith is inexcusable.

Introduction

If you wanted a respectable-looking, easy-to-read reference to justify your belief in theistic evolution then this book could be it. The author is a long-time and respected Professor of Biology at an ostensibly Christian university, the publisher is well known and has a stable of similarly orientated books, the Foreword is by the Director of the US National Human Genome Research Institute, there are plaudits on the back cover from respected academics, and the book has five-star ratings on Amazon.com. However, the respectability is only superficial. The author's understanding of the Bible,



theology, philosophy, science (he claims to be an expert in science) and the subject of origins is abysmal and the result is self-contradictory. At no point does he engage with published criticisms of his position, so he writes in an uncritical vacuum of his own making. The result is bad science and bad theology.

Contents

Falk writes as if he is breaking new ground, but it has all been said before. On the one occasion that he does address two critiques of his position (p.199), he does it as if in response to spoken comments from his students, not from any published literature that he has read. He quotes three young-earth creationist (YEC) authors (Morris, Gish and Whitcomb) but only to make points in his own arguments, and at no stage does he attempt to address published YEC critiques of compromise positions, including his own. *He thus presumes to contribute a complementary view of creation to the YEC position without having researched the subject!*

His stated aim is to build a bridge between six-day recent creation and long-age evolution by using Scripture (pp.14, 16). But by 'building a