
In the spring of 2007, Harvard College announced that it was revamping its general education curriculum. Though the final recommendation watered down a proposed new requirement in Reason and Faith to the more neutral Culture and Belief, the faculty task force argued that their undergraduate students “often struggle to sort out the relationship between their own beliefs and practices and those of fellow students, and the relationship of religious belief to the resolutely secular world of the academy.”1 Though “Harvard is a secular institution . . . religion is an important part of our students’ lives.”2

It may seem odd, at a time when varieties of religious fundamentalism both at home and abroad play such a prominent role in American culture, that our pre-eminent college would find it necessary to remind itself that religion is something undergraduates should encounter as part of their liberal arts education. After all, as the testifying among the current crop of presidential candidates from both parties demonstrates, Americans may accept separation of church and state, but only if their leaders are also churchgoers. While creeping secularism is hardly a notable trend in the nation at large, within academe there is mounting concern about internal and external challenges to the presumed consensus that religion, except as a field of disinterested academic study, has no place in the university. It is not always clear whether curricular responses like Harvard’s aim at encouraging genuine engagement with faith or instead are intended to arm students to “confront” the forces of religion with confidence.

Tracy Fessenden’s Culture and Redemption sets out to examine the paradox of America’s formal commitment to secularism—that is, our official doctrines of separation of church and state and religious toleration—and our simultaneous adherence to an essentially religious understanding of our own origins, history, and destiny. Consider, for instance, the Battle Hymn of the Republic, at once a patriotic anthem and a Protestant hymn. What must newcomers think when they first hear

2. Id. at 11.
this ode to a nation whose God has “loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword”? Kids learn this ditty in school, choirs sing it at politicians’ funerals, and most of us never give a moment’s thought to the bloody apocalypse promised in its lyrics. It is just part of the fabric of who we are as a nation. How did this come to pass?

Professor Fessenden, who teaches at Arizona State University, takes on the ambitious task of tracing the cultural and literary history of Americans’ domestication of the sacred within the secular from the Puritans to the Roaring Twenties. She argues that “secularism” and “tolerance” have been mobilized in support of, and hence have masked, Protestant ascendancy so effectively and for so long that its premises have come to seem natural, normal, and incontestable. In much the same way that contemporary scholars have identified “whiteness” or “maleness” as “unmarked categories”—as though only women have gender and only minorities have race—Fessenden asserts that Protestant dominance in the United States has been effectively hidden by its very ubiquity. Her project is essentially to add religion, both in its creedal and cultural manifestations, to the existing “holy trinity” of markers of difference—race, class and gender—around which so much of American literary and historical scholarship has centered since the 1970s.

Culture and Redemption counters the commonplace convention that America has become more secular as an inevitable consequence of becoming more modern, more diverse. To some extent, Fessenden’s is not a new argument: scholars going back at least to Perry Miller and Cushing Strout have traced the enduring impact of the Puritan conception of a covenanted nation of saints on what would become America’s characteristic “civil religion.” This is the millennial and redemptive strain that echoes in Lincoln’s invocation of America as the “last best hope of earth,” or Reagan’s repeated allusions to John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill.” It is this civil religion—usually presented in nationalistic or democratic rather than theological language—that has enabled American leaders to conflate progress and providence, and to assume the righteousness of the country’s motives, at home and abroad, for centuries.

But there is a second element to Fessenden’s analysis that is more subtle, more original, and more elusive. In her interpretation (drawing on the work of Max Weber and others), secularity itself is part of the logic of reformed Protestantism, with its elevation of private devotion over public ritual, the vernacular over Latin or Hebrew, the secular calendar over the religious one: “Evacuating religious authority from its institutional locations [in the Roman Catholic Church],” she argues,
The Reformation generated its presence “everywhere,” not least in secular guise—an outcome, it further bears reminding, given as “truth” or “freedom” in the measure that the Reformation frames its program as liberation from the errors and superstitions of Rome. In this sense, Protestantism’s emancipation from Catholicism both provides the blueprint for, and sets the limits of, secularism’s emancipation from “religion” itself. (4)

The consequences of this, for Fessenden, are twofold: first, religion in America was increasingly identified with “private conviction rather than civil allegiance.” (60) Second, the preference for this mode of religious faith and practice over all others meant that the parameters of religious “freedom” or “toleration” were limited to, or at least by, the prevailing Protestant consensus:

In the United States, whose founding documents aimed to unite a presumptively (if diversely) Christian population under the mantle of religious tolerance, the rule of noninterference between religion and government, far from consigning all religions equally to the silent margins of the political, instead created the conditions for the dominance of an increasingly nonspecific Protestantism over nearly all aspects of American life, a dominance as pervasive as it is invisible for exceeding the domains we conventionally figure as religious. (61)

Fessenden traces the development of what she calls the “Protestant-secular continuum” (9, 214) beginning with Puritan sermons and concluding with the emergence of an alternative Catholic “secularism” in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Along the way, her densely-argued narrative considers an enormous variety of primary materials and scholarly treatises. The first half of the book is more historically organized; the second offers four linked but largely self-contained readings of canonical American authors and the “cultural work” their writings performed to advance or oppose the Protestant consensus. Her illustrative evidence in Part One ranges from Puritan conquest and captivity narratives, which figured the Indians as “ruines of mankind,” in Cotton Mather’s phrase, thus justifying their destruction, to the New England Primer, which taught generations of young Americans the alphabet via explicitly Protestant lessons (e.g., “In Adam’s fall, we sinned all.”).

Legal historians may be most interested in her discussion of the “Bible wars” of the nineteenth century. Following religious disestablishment, Protestant elites created the public school system—with a curriculum centered on the King James Bible—as a means of bringing the children of both increasingly sectarian Protestants and
growing numbers of Catholic immigrants under the influence of a single “American Christian” institution. Immigrant parents objected that these schools intended to convert their children to Protestantism. Court battles and anti-Catholic riots ensued, resulting in the eventual establishment of separate Catholic (and later Jewish) private schools in many cities. These conflicts—in which mainstream Protestants asserted the right to define what was “moral” and “American” against the foreign “religious” claims of Catholics and Jews—resound to this day in conservative evangelical arguments that prayer in public schools and the teaching of “intelligent design” are necessary to preserve the traditional fabric of “American” society.

In Part Two, Fessenden provides close readings of classic works by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mark Twain and F. Scott Fitzgerald, delineating the contributions of each writer to “a vision of American democratic space that, in varying measure, underscores or upends the Protestant-secular continuum.” (9) Though each of these chapters contains shrewd insights, the very density of Fessenden’s analysis and the impressive range of her sources threaten to overwhelm her more central argument. And while much of her writing is sharp and pithy, there are other passages, particularly in this latter half, where it is hard to follow her meaning through heavy thickets of literary critical jargon. An “Afterword,” which might usefully have served to tie together the many strands of this very ambitious book, instead comments on what Fessenden sees as the continuing “hegemonic power of appeals to a Protestant consensus in American public life” (213) in the Bush administration’s justification of the “war on terror” and the current conflict with Islam. While this extension of her argument is logical enough, the afterword seems more of a digression than a conclusion, which a book of this range mightly needs. Despite these quibbles, Tracy Fessenden has written a provocative, learned, and timely study, one which is daring in its scope and complexity. It questions many of our most common assumptions about the relations between the secular and the religious in American life, and in so doing, helps us understand why we don’t think twice when the band strikes up “Glory, Glory, Hallelujah,” but probably should.

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