

John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 313 pp. \$40.00. ISBN: 978-0-226-53323-0 (hbk).

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Once the notion of God residing above the world was abandoned, what remained was a secular world, but not an atheistic world. According to the story Charles Taylor tells, a vertical relationship of necessary subordination to the divine was replaced by a horizontal array of religious options from which to choose. John Lardas Modern argues that such a choice is not, in fact, what results from the secularization accompanying modernity, at least in the nineteenth century United States. Rather, what results is a mix of system and spirit, affect and reason, ghosts and machines. In other words, what a secular age entails is not the refusal or relativization of religion but rather the inexorable entanglement of the ostensibly religious and the ostensibly secular. Put another way, everywhere that we find an ostensibly secular impulse in nineteenth century America, religion (or spirituality) is nearby – and vice versa.

Secularism in Antebellum America offers compelling examples of this thesis, beautifully narrated and illustrated. We learn about the way printing technology facilitated the mass dissemination of religious tracts, tracts that would mount rational arguments but would also prompt a “mystic flash” when read alone. Beneath an 1851 statistical chart reproduced from the American Tract Society, Modern writes, “Tracts fed off of themselves in a protective manner, continually charging and recharged by their own propensity for circulation among the populace” (94). For Modern, an important facet of the secular age is the distribution of agency over objects without regard to a distinction between animate and inanimate. Tracts are treated as agents having capacities and powers, but this agency comes about as part of a system, a network of circulating tracts, where humans and tracts alike are agentive nodes in the network. This is just another way of putting Modern’s primary thesis, that the seemingly rational impulse towards statistically-measured dissemination of knowledge is inextricable from the religious – the religious content of that knowledge and the religious overtones of inanimate objects taking on a life of their own.

While the thesis, period, and region of Modern’s text remain consistent, the topics and genres vary. A reading of Melville’s fiction figures centrally in one chapter; the life of the anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan provides the backbone of another; and another chapter reads prison reform against the background of the supernatural/erotic experience of a leading reformer. Phrenology plays a major role in another chapter, marking yet another way in which the rational impulse of modernity mingles with the spiritual. The Boston Phrenological Society made “a concerted effort to frame phrenology as both true religion and true science of the mind,” and, according to proponents, it was “destined to form a new era in Christianity” (151). Modern tracks the business of phrenology: its advertising and brand building efforts, its publications, the economics of phrenological examinations, and tourism to phrenological museums – all growing in close relation with liberal Protestantism. In a sense, Modern points to capital as another name for the mix of system and spirit that he finds characteristic of nineteenth century America, for capital quantifies and rationalizes at the same time it mystifies and animates.

The narratives of secularism Modern tells have political consequences. Phrenologists aspire to “Phrenologize Our Nation.” In Robert Baird’s 1843 account of American religion, which Modern locates in the context of proliferating publishing technology, civil society is described in

parallel with the Holy Spirit – the two “were immanent reverberations of an ultimate source” resulting in “the lingering impression that both divine reason and political rationality corresponded to something, quite literally, in between” (82). At the same time that religion was privatized, with reading providing privileged access to God through expanding self-knowledge, there was an obligation to make all citizens readers, and so to make the nation conform with the text – the Biblical text. Modern quotes the *New-York Evangelist*: “The good of the country, therefore, is promoted just as its *sentiments* -- its laws and institutions come into sympathy with this legislation of heaven” (107). Here again Modern finds affect (“sentiments”) conjoined with reason (“laws and institutions”), an association that reduplicates the pairing of secular, national politics with the “legislation of heaven.”

Secularism is often used to refer to an ideology that excludes religion, but much of the time Modern seems to use secularism as synonymous with a secular era, an age organized by immanence instead of transcendence. Indeed, Modern claims that the secularism he discusses is “more than an ideology”: “It is a moral force, a connective tissue, a widely shared and massively intricate set of political and epistemological assumptions” (282-3). This description of what supposedly exceeds ideology sounds very much like a description of ideology itself: political and epistemological assumptions, connective tissue, moral force. What Modern perhaps means is that there is an all-encompassing nature to secularism. Like Taylor’s account of our secular age, for Modern secularism sets the terms for how we view self, world, society, and spirit, and these terms are the pre-condition for any specific ideology, located in a specific time and place. Ideology might make us see the world in a particular way and might authorize certain practices and institutions, but ideology itself is authorized by an era’s religious disposition – towards the transcendent or immanent, axial or secular.

Yet the efficacy of ideology is proportionate to its apparent exhaustiveness, the extent to which it speaks to all words and things, makes them seem to hang together. This is what Modern shows so well, both in the time and place he writes about and in his own presentation. Across genres, denominations, and technological apparatus, the same principle is at work: spirit and system are mutually constitutive. But in the way that Modern’s presentation adopts as its methodological principle the same principle that he is seeking to describe in antebellum America, Modern’s text can be read as un-critical, even ideological. He seems committed to the ideology that he claims exceeds ideology – which is exactly what every ideology claims of itself. In so doing, the reader is left wondering whether difference matters. While Modern attempts to incorporate Native Americans and women into his story of secularism, there is little discussion of racial or ethnic differences that might not be able to be incorporated into the logic of secularism Modern so well describes, or of regional differences across the United States. In short, one worries that Modern has not only told a story of the mystifications that authorize American triumphalism, but that he himself has embraced that story.

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