

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

BARRY A. KOSMIN and ARIELA KEYSAR (Eds.) *Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives*. Hartford, CT: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, 2007, 168 p.

*Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives* is a valuable collection of short articles providing an overview of secular values and policies in the modern world. Secularism refers to the practices of social institutions, secularity to individuals' beliefs and actions. Chapters are devoted to the United States, Canada, Australia, France, Denmark, Iran, India, and Israel. The key idea underlying this volume is that "just as there are many ways of being religious, so there are many ways of not being religious" (iii). Part one concentrates on secular populations, measuring non-religiosity in terms of belief, belonging, and behaviour. Part two is about the varieties of secularism. Kosmin, in his excellent introduction, also distinguishes between "hard" and "soft" degrees of secularism and secularity.

Paradoxically, most secularists are to some extent "religious" or "spiritual." Thus there are many initially puzzling aspects of secularity and secularism which this book documents in every chapter, making readers sensitive to the often illogical nature of common sense. For instance, among Americans who report that they have "no religion," 57% nonetheless believe that God can perform miracles (7). Some self-declared atheists in England, according to Voas and Day, report seeing ghosts (98).

Ariela Keysar and Barry A. Kosmin measure the secularity of Americans in their chapter "The Freethinkers in a Free Market of Religion." They conclude that the American population which shows the least interest in religion is typically male, young (18 to 35), unmarried, of white or Asian ancestry, unaffiliated with any political party, and residents of the Western areas of the United States. Bruce A. Phillip's study "Putting Secularity in Context" is so brief that it is really a research note. Nonetheless, Phillips makes an important point. It is not clear what the recent decline in church attendance in many countries represents. It may not reflect an actual increase in secular beliefs as much as the growth of individualism and an "atomistic disengagement" from society.

Ariela Keysar, in her chapter "Who are America's Atheists and Agnostics?," relies on findings from the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey to provide a demographic and social profile of three

distinct groups: self-identified atheists, self-identified agnostics, and those who answer “none” when asked about their religion. Keysar concludes that while the first two groups are quite small, the third (called the no-religion group) constitutes about 13 % of the American population. She further shows the differences and the similarities among these three groups in terms of demographic variables. Emphasizing the differences, she argues that one should not put atheists, agnostics, and the “no religion” population in one undifferentiated category.

“The ‘Nonreligious’ in the American Northwest” by Frank L. Pasquale investigates the “quintessentially secular,” that is people who most strongly reject religion. He calls this category the “nots.” Pasquale explores the nature and extent of their affiliation with voluntary associations. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of his study is his explanation of what in the philosophical outlook of the quintessentially secular prevents them from more aggressively promoting their ideals. William A. Stahl in his chapter “Is Anyone in Canada Secular?” contends that Giddens’ term “disembedding” is a better concept for understanding the religious behaviour of Canadians than is the term “secular.” Disembedding means that religious institutions function within a non-traditional social context. Many Canadians rarely attend church but they continue to engage occasionally in private religious/spiritual behaviour. That aspect of their values is not captured by labelling them secular.

Patricia O’Connell Killen, who is a historian, responds to the research by Pasquale and Stahl. She puts Pasquale’s research in perspective by claiming that many of the social values of the “nots” actually resemble those of the religious. More than most contributors to this volume, Killen purposefully blurs the distinction between spiritual and non-spiritual behaviour. “Is reflective meaning-making a spiritual activity?” she asks (75). Her reaction to Stahl’s research is to contend that he is naïve if he thinks that multiculturalism, individualism, tolerance, and political and economic loyalties can create a level of social cohesion equal to that achieved historically by religious communities. She also criticizes both authors for de-emphasizing the role of institutions in understanding the worldviews of individuals. Andrew Singleton’s study of Australians is certainly valuable for readers interested in that country. His findings, however, tend to resemble those in the previous studies. His research does show that secularism is more evenly spread among the populations age 13 to 59 than would seem to be true in North America. (90).

One of the highlights of this volume is David Voas and Abby Day’s “Secularity in Great Britain.” The United Kingdom provides a valuable contrast to the previous chapters because the Anglican Church retains vestiges of its historic power as an established church which has no counterpart in North American and Australia. However, the authors’ claim that “indeed, the implicit assumption seems to be that a modest dose of religion is good for people – or at least other people” (96) would seem to be equally true of many countries. The British tend to be uninterested in religion rather than hostile. The result is an eclectic mix of

religious/spiritual beliefs, folk beliefs, and implicit religion. The limitation (or the advantage) of such private religious belief systems, weakly associated with institutions, is that it is difficult to pass them on to descendants. Voas and Day distinguish among three types of people for whom religion is relatively unimportant: natal nominalists (for whom religion is basically a family heritage), ethnic nominalists (for whom religion is primarily an ethnic marker), and aspirational nominalists (people who aspire to attend church but rarely go). Therefore, in Great Britain (as elsewhere) religion can still be “an aspect of personal identity which does not depend on active participation, official membership, or even agreement with basic doctrines” (97).

France is an officially secular nation; secularism is enshrined in the constitution and in laws which separate religion and education. However, as Nathalie Caron points out in “Laïcité and Secular Attitudes in France” one sees some of the inconsistencies in France which mark public attitudes in Britain and North America. France is a secular nation with a Catholic culture; in the 1980s and 1990s the number of French Catholics who believed in life after death declined while there was an increase in the number of “non-religious” people who thought that life did not end at death. “Secularism” and “laïcité” are not synonyms in that the latter discourse arose in the 18th and 19th centuries in an intense struggle by Enlightenment philosophers and the French public to destroy the monopoly of the Catholic Church as an educational, religious, and above all, political institution. The word “laïcité” thus has militant and political connotations which the English word “secularism” (derived from the Latin word for “age” or “century”) lacks. The official secularism of France is being tested by some immigrant populations who want religion to be more visible in the public sphere than is consistent with mainstream, and especially left-wing, attitudes of the French. Caron distinguishes among three segments of the French population: those who want to revise the 1905 law which institutionalized secularism, those who remain committed to the ideals of secularism but are willing to make some accommodations in view of recent social changes, and those who are militantly secular. Once again, it seems that secularists are disproportionately male, young, and relatively well educated.

Lars Dencik in “The Paradox of Secularism in Denmark: From Emancipation to Ethnocentrism?” relates the de-traditionalization of Danish society to the “modernization” of Scandinavian welfare states: rationalization, individuation, and secularism. Although the dominant ideology in contemporary Denmark is one of secularism, Denmark (which is relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnicity) continues to maintain a state church which is more influential than the Anglican Church in the United Kingdom. An institutionalized Lutheran belief system coexists with secular values such as gender equality, equality of sexual orientation, children’s rights, etc. This blend constitutes what Dencik labels a “dominant cosmology of secularized Lutheranism” (131). The reaction to recent immigration has been to place more emphasis on Lutheranism as an “ethno-cultural demarcation sign” but also, and again paradoxically, to embrace secularism. As one can see in other countries, secularism can

serve “not only as a vehicle for individual emancipation, but also, as an effective instrument for a militant ethnocentrism” (137).

Given the difficulties of measuring secularism in Iran, Nastaran Moossavi attempts only to review the literature on the topic. Since there are no reliable social surveys, she points out that the focus must be on reviewing the writings of those who consider themselves secular. She traces the roots of secularism in Iran back to the years around the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. The author’s main point is that while secularism began in 1906, it is still an “unfinished project” and therefore should be understood as an ongoing process, with its ups and downs. Also, she believes the problems of reconciling Islam and democracy, intellectualism and religiosity, rationality and faith, and similar issues are yet to be worked out without interference from foreign governments such as the United States.

Politically, India is a secular nation, according to Ashgar Ali Engineer in “Secularism in India,” but its people are deeply religious. In the absence of survey data, he estimates that perhaps one-tenth of one percent of the population are secular in the Western sense. Engineer emphasizes the traditional tolerance of Indian society which pre-dated British rule. Given the variety of religions which exist in the country, it was essential to create a secular state, although religion is still central to people’s lives. The chapter provides a brief overview of the communal struggles which have occurred in India since the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan. The last chapter in this book, “The Secular Israeli [Jewish] Identity: An Impossible Dream?” by Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, emphasizes the radically secular nature of Zionism, although Jewish secularization can be traced back to the 18th century. He shows that even those Jews who have completely stopped participating in the rituals of Judaism (including the Zionist founders of Israel and Israeli Prime Ministers) are often surprisingly respectful of Orthodox and Conservative Jewish practices. While secular Israelis are offended when the authenticity of their Jewishness is challenged, “less than 10 percent of world Jewry today preserves historical Judaism” (158). Whether secular or observant, Beit-Hallahmi concludes, there is a national consensus around a Jewish identity which is based on religion and is thus bound to result in contradictory behavior and state policies.

*Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives* is an exceptionally interesting book, although the brevity of the chapters can be frustrating. The term “international” in the subtitle is a bit exaggerated when so much of the world is overlooked. In the early chapters emphasis is placed on statistics, although the book is light on details about methodology which might have allowed readers to evaluate better the validity of these statistics. This is, nonetheless, an ideal book to assign in undergraduate sociology of religion courses and in courses on minority groups. However, the instructor will have to provide a lot of additional information about the historical and political events discussed in these chapters for students to have a proper understanding of them.

*Masoud Kianpour, Memorial University of Newfoundland.*

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