Phil Zuckerman and John H. Shook (eds)

The Oxford Handbook of Secularism

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Curiously, secularism has become one of the most fashionable subjects of study for social scientists specializing in religion. The interest started around the mid-nineteenth century, but, following the so-called "secularization debate" of the second half of the last century, the study of rapidly multiplying numbers of "nones" in the West (many of whom fall into the rather nebulous category of "spiritual but not religious") has led to a variety of secularisms coming under ever-increasing scrutiny throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

In this weighty volume, the editors do not impose a definitive definition of "secularism" on the 53 contributors, who collectively produce 43 chapters. They do, however, provide a useful introduction, sketching the scope of the term and indicating how it overlaps with, but is separable from, other terms such as agnosticism, anti-clericalism, atheism, free-thinking, humanism, materialism, naturalism, rationalism, skepticism, and/or (this-)worldliness. They take pains to distinguish between secularists, who are promoting an agenda, and secularism, which is a state of being—be it of a person, an institution, or a culture.

Having examined the scope of secularism, Zuckerman and Shook conclude that there are six major modes of modern secularism: political, economic, educational, ethical, and scientific secularisms and religious criticism. Guided by these themes, the book is divided into six parts. Part One sets out to identify the secular, secularity, secularization, and secularisms. Here, Ariela Keysar provides an abundance of statistics, which she uses to analyze various aspects of non-religiosity. One table that includes Eastern and Central European countries, among others, compares adult non-religious individuals and atheists. Azerbaijan comes out as the most non-religious, with Hong Kong having the most declared atheists, almost twice as many as a country like Estonia, which does, however, rank near the top in number of "non-religious" persons.

In addition, in Part One, Steve Bruce sets out his secularization paradigm, which posits the various steps that led from the Protestant Reformation to secularization, a process that he sees as well-nigh irreversible. Mark Juergensmeyer examines ways in which distorted perceptions of secularism—which characterize it as incompatible with a religious society—can result on the one hand in the Islamic terrorism of ISIS and on the other in the Christian terrorisms exemplified by the Oklahoma bomber, Timothy McVeigh, and Anders Breivik, the far-right Norwegian who was responsible for the deaths of 77 individuals in 2011.

Part Two consists of nine chapters that describe secular governments in Anglo-America, France, Turkey, Israel, Islamic nations, Sub-Saharan Africa, India, China, Taiwan, and—in the only chapter that directly addresses secularism in Eastern Europe—the Soviet Union. Sonia Luehrmann offers a historical overview of "Soviet Atheism and its Aftermath," starting with the establishment of a non-Christian burial ground in the inner courtyard of the Alexander Nevskii Monastery in St. Petersburg, where communist elites were buried after 1919. Luehrmann takes the reader through Soviet history before, during, and after World War II, telling of times when there were ruthless suppressions, outlawing, confiscations, and murders of religious institutions, practices, property and personnel, respectively, as well as other times when the persecutions were somewhat tempered—not least when the rulers could make use

of religious organizations to further their own goals. She ends by asking "whether there can be a secular orientation toward existential insecurity" (p. 242).

Part Three, entitled "Contesting Political Secularism," attempts to some extent to address Luehrmann's question. Part Four, "Politics of Church and State," examines some of the ways in which these two institutions can co-exist through co-operation, collaboration, conflict, and/or various kinds of legal "separation." Part Five, "Secularity and Society," examines the more personal lives of non-religious individuals in African, American, Japanese, Jewish, and Muslim settings. These chapters do, however, cover ground that is of relevance to European scholars by illustrating the similarities and enormous differences among the various secularisms to be found throughout the world.

The final part, "Morality and Secular Ethics," includes arguments about the necessity or counter-productiveness of religion for knowledge of the good and of right actions. Sor-hoon Tan states that "[t]he capacity to behave ethically lies in human nature, and reasons for acting ethically are to be found in the facts of this world, which human beings can discover and understand with their senses, their ability to think, and the tools they have created" (p. 673). Tan further points out that secular ethics are not a new challenge; they can be found in both Confucianism and Aristotelian philosophy. The book ends with a provocative chapter in which Bryan Turner asks what could be the justification for living forever. The goal of merely surviving, meaningless in itself, has, he argues, replaced the desire to live a life of virtue and significance (p. 271).

This is not a book one sits down to read cover to cover, but it is a book that contains much that is well worth reading for scholars interested in the many forms of secularism. It is probably too expensive for individuals to purchase, but it is certainly worth making sure that your library has it in stock.

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