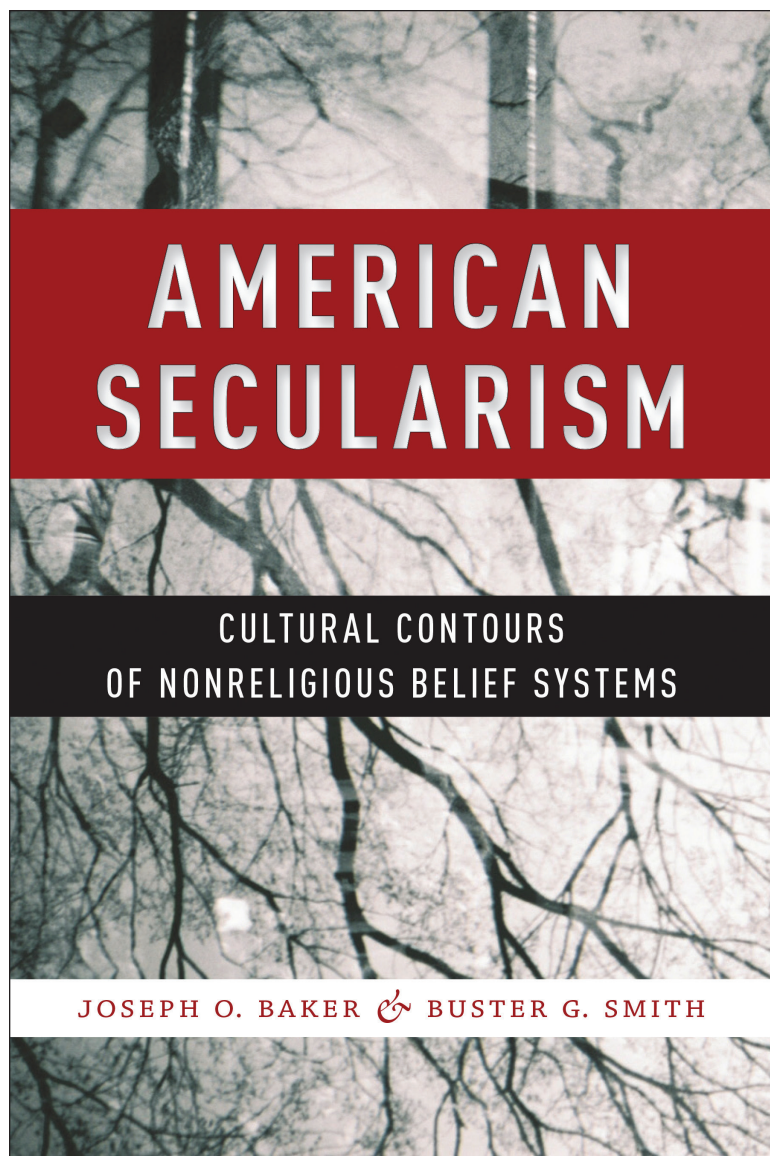


AMERICAN SECULARISM

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



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A rapidly growing number of Americans are embracing life outside the bounds of organized religion. Although America has long been viewed as a fervently religious Christian nation, survey data shows that more and more Americans are identifying as “not religious.” There are more non-religious Americans than ever before, yet social scientists have not adequately studied or typologized secularities, and the lived reality of secular individuals in America has not been astutely analyzed. *American Secularism* documents how changes to American society have fueled these shifts in the non-religious landscape and examines the diverse and dynamic world of secular Americans.

This volume offers a theoretical framework for understanding secularisms. It explores secular Americans’ thought and practice to understand secularisms as worldviews in their own right, not just as negations of religion. Drawing on empirical data, the authors examine how people live secular lives and make meaning outside of organized religion. Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith link secularities to broader issues of social power and organization, providing an empirical and cultural perspective on the secular landscape. In so doing, they demonstrate that shifts in American secularism are reflective of changes in the political meanings of “religion” in American culture.

American Secularism addresses the contemporary lived reality of secular individuals, outlining forms of secular identity and showing their connection to patterns of family formation, sexuality, and politics, providing scholars of religion with a more comprehensive understanding of worldviews that do not include traditional religion.

“A Nation of Nonbelievers”

SUMMARY

The Introduction shows that since the 1980s the proportion of Americans who are nonreligious has substantially increased. At the same time, the fact that a lower proportion of American adults are secular compared to other post-industrial countries has obscured scholarly interest in secularity in the U.S. To help situate how authority figures in the U.S. frame secularity in relation to nationalism, the chapter discusses the rare and uniformly condemning references to secularity in Presidential rhetoric from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to George W. Bush. This makes the positive mention of “non-believers” in Barack Obama’s first inaugural address a notable contrast. The four primary goals of the book are then outlined, which include: 1) highlighting the diversity and complexity of secularities; 2) the implications of the growth and study of secularities for scholarly theories “of religion”; 3) investigating the historical, cultural, and political dimensions of secularities; and 4) identifying the sociological patterns and consequences of various expressions of secularity. The chapter ends with a brief outline of the book.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- How has the proportion of Americans who are “not religious” changed since the 1980s? Why has the proportion of Americans who are nonreligious obscured the acknowledgement of the large number of Americans who are secular?
- How have American Presidents discussed secularity (particularly atheism) in the past? In what context did Barack Obama mention “non-believers” in his first inaugural address and how did this compare with the rhetoric of previous Presidents?
- What are the four key areas the introduction outlines as goals for studying American secularism in the book?
- Define the concept of “cosmic belief system.” Why is this concept useful for studying secularities? What is the difference between “nonreligion” and “irreligion?”

“A Cultural View of Secularities”

SUMMARY

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the theoretical perspectives used to study secularities throughout the book, as well as how the study of secularity challenges taken-for-granted understandings in fields engaged in the study of religion. The chapter begins with the personal and professional narrative of Lester F. Ward, the first president of the American Sociological Society. Ward’s life and thought provide insight not only into his personal nonreligious identity, but also into the “science vs. religion” narrative that would come to dominate social scientific theories about and studies of religion. In contrast to such an approach, the authors propose studying secularities in ways mirroring studies of religiosity. In order to do so, a broader concept than religion is needed that encompasses both religiosity and secularity, as well as paranormalism. Cosmic belief systems is proposed as a concept capable of integrating the study of multiple areas of ultimate meaning and experiences beyond, but also including, organized religions.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Who was Lester F. Ward? What did Ward argue for regarding the connections between science and religion? Why is his work on science, religion, and secularization useful for understanding how the social sciences have traditionally addressed religion (and secularity)?
- How do the authors propose to conceptualize and study secularities? In what ways do they posit that a nonreligious status can affect individuals?
- What are “cosmic belief systems” and why do the authors propose using this concept for use in fields engaged in studies of religion?

“Historical Foundations”

SUMMARY

This chapter provides a brief sketch of the history of secularism in the United States since the colonial era. Immediately following the American Revolution, deism became the most prominent philosophical vehicle for criticizing organized religion, as exemplified by writers such as Revolutionary heroes Thomas Paine and Ethan Allen. In particular, the work of writers such as Paine helped diffuse freethought traditions from aristocratic philosophies into ideas accessible to the general public. This period transitioned into an era of “evangelical” freethought, where charismatic speakers and authors such as Abner Kneeland began to proselytize to the public in multiple forums in an effort to increase and organize secular social movements. Ultimately these efforts were outdone by the proselytizing efforts of organized religions in the Second Great Awakening. The emergence of Darwinian evolutionary perspectives in the 1860s provided the impetus for a new movement in secularity that saw no need for theism in questions of morality. This “evolutionary agnosticism” was advocated in both the natural and social sciences. In the wake of the American Civil War, secular organizations again attempted to direct secular Americans toward specific political goals, to little avail. While many of the ideas proposed by secular thinkers diffused more widely into American culture during the first half of the 20th-century, organized secularism weakened in response to the First, and especially Second Red Scares. The post-WWII era would ultimately become the high water mark of religious affiliation and participation in the U.S., accompanied by a vociferous condemnation of secularity as being communist.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What was the public response to Paine’s Age of Reason? What prompted this response?
- Why were freethought movements in the early 1800s “evangelical?” What did freethinkers such as Elihu Palmer and Abner Kneeland attempt to do with regard to organized secularism?
- How did the introduction of Darwinian evolution change the tone and content of secular philosophy in the academy?
- What was the American Secular Union? What were the results of efforts to organize the Union around political issues?
- How did the First and Second Red Scares influence cultural understandings of secularities?

“Historical Foundations”

- What are some of the recurring themes important for understanding the history of secularisms in the United States?

“The Great Abdicating”

SUMMARY

Chapter 4 uses data from the General Social Survey to track changes in religiosity and secularity in the U.S. between the 1970s and the present, as well as to outline how demographic and political influences are contributing to these changes. The chapter begins by showing how the percentage of Americans who are married has declined, while the percentage who are divorced/separated or who never marry has increased significantly. At the same time, American women have become much less likely to report homemaking as their primary occupational responsibility. Coupled with these demographic changes, countercultural ideas in the 1960s inspired a conservative backlash in the 1970s and 80s, which consolidated the “Religious Right” as a voting bloc organized around issues of sexual politics. During this time both (white) “fundamentalists” and secular Americans became more consistent voting blocs, and the proportion of delegates to national conventions who were either evangelical (at GOP conventions) or secular (at Democratic conventions) increased substantially. In light of these changes, beginning in 1992 the Republican national platform emphasized issues of family and sexuality as central concerns of the party. This transformation is mirrored in public opinion, where political polarization corresponds closely with an increase in political liberals who claim no religious affiliation. To demonstrate how the proportion of Americans with no religion changed so rapidly, the chapter details the vast increase in apostasy rates for those raised religious, as well as retention rates for those raised secular. The chapter ends by using apostasy and secular retention rates to project the proportion of Americans who will be secular by 2050. While apostasy rates will produce increased secularity in the short term, low birth rates by seculars constrain the ability of secularity to increase “religious market share” beyond certain thresholds.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How has family structure (rates of marriage, divorce, and women “keeping house”) changed since the 1970s?
- What is the “God strategy”? How has the political use of religion changed since the 1970s?
- How has religion become more politically polarized since the 1970s? How does this relate to the number of Americans who claim “no religion?”
- How did the national platform of the Republican Party change in 1992? What role did this play in the “culture wars?”

“The Great Abdicating”

- How has confidence and participation in organized religion changed since the 1970s? How have the rates of religious socialization among children changed?
- How have rates of apostasy from organized religion and maintaining secularity after being raised secular changed among Americans across birth cohorts?
- What criteria do the authors use to project secularity to 2050? What is their best estimate for the proportion of Americans who will be secular in the mid-21st-century? What is the most important factor restricting the continued growth of secularity?

“Nonreligious Belief System”

SUMMARY

This chapter outlines some of the basic dimensions of the worldviews of different types of secularists with regard to views of religion, paranormal beliefs, happiness and life satisfaction, and views of science. Approaches to organized religion are relatively uniform across atheists, agnostics, and nonaffiliated believers, such that few members of each category are involved with or have much confidence in organized religion; however, there are substantial differences with regard to private spirituality, such that nonaffiliated believers are the most likely to think of themselves as “spiritual but not religious” and find value in at least some aspects of religion. Nonaffiliated believers and the culturally religious also have levels of belief in the “paranormal” higher than both non-theists and the actively religious. The chapter then critically evaluates the “unhappy atheists” myth, showing that levels of self-rated happiness and life satisfaction are not lower among non-theists. In fact, the lowest levels of happiness are found among the liminal categories of nonaffiliated belief and cultural religion. In general, however, there is little connection between secularity and happiness. Regarding views of science, atheists are the most likely to subscribe to the ideology of “science vs. religion” and to place faith in science to solve human problems. Nonaffiliated believers are the least likely to view science and religion as incompatible. Examining questions about conflict between one’s identity and society or with a person’s family, nonaffiliated belief emerges as a response to the cross pressures exerted by one’s family to be religious and a personal distrust in organized religion. The chapter concludes by discussing some of the primary themes of secular identities, as well as a summary of studies on the psychology of atheism. A prominent theme in all identities is the view that secularity is actually more moral than organized religion. The chapter concludes by discussing the role of “rational” cognition—slow, deliberate cognitive evaluation rather than intuition—as a primary cognitive style of atheism.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the patterns regarding views of organized religion that are found among the different categories of secularists? Which types of secularists are more open to privatized spirituality?
- How do different types of secularists relate to belief in the “paranormal?” What does this indicate about the relationship between both firm secularity and strong religiosity with paranormalism?
- Are atheists less happy than actively religious people? In general, how strong

“*Nonreligious Belief System*”

is the relationship between secularity (or active religiosity) and self-rated happiness or life satisfaction?

- What are some of the prominent patterns found regarding views of science for different types of secularists? Which expressions of secularity are more likely to place “faith” in science? Which ones are more likely to view science and religion as compatible?
- What are some of the prominent themes of secular identity found? What are some of the cognitive patterns of atheism identified by psychological studies?

“Ethnicity, Assimilation, and Secularity”

SUMMARY

Chapter 6 opens by examining the life and thought of W. E. B. Du Bois, using religion and secularity as an interpretive key to understanding Du Bois’ social theory. Although Du Bois is generally understood as an “irreligious” scholar, he both examines religion empirically with social scientific studies and writes fiction using religious symbolism in order to combat the racial apartheid of Jim Crow. On this count Du Bois’ life is insightful regarding the complexities of secularity for racial minorities, while his social theory is useful for understanding racial and ethnic, but also other social identities. The chapter then outlines some of the socioeconomic and assimilation patterns among secularists, broken down by race and ethnicity. Among white Americans, secularity is associated with higher levels of social class, particularly higher education among non-theists. For African Americans, higher levels of social class do not lead to higher rates of secularity, although black atheists and agnostics do tend to have higher levels of social class. For Asian Americans the most prominent pattern concerns immigrant status, such that second generation Americans have high rates of secularity. First generation Asian Americans tend to maintain non-Western religious traditions, while third (or later) generations adopt Protestantism at high rates, indicating that second generation Asian Americans often mark a generational shift from Eastern to Western traditions, opting out of organized religion as a result of being caught between the religion of their parents and the normative religion of the U.S. For Hispanic Americans, there are also notable patterns by immigration status, such that higher levels of assimilation to American culture—as measured by language, media consumption, and social class—relate to higher levels of secularity. In effect, the more assimilated Hispanic Americans are, the more likely they are to be secular. The chapter concludes with excerpts from an interview with David Tamayo, founder of Hispanic American Freethinkers, a non-profit organization for secularists of Hispanic ethnicity. Tamayo discusses his personal narrative of secularity, some of the unique challenges faced by Hispanic American secularists, and some of the issues addressed by organized secularism groups.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What was W. E. B. Du Bois’ approach to religion, both personally and professionally? What did Du Bois’ use of religious symbolism in fictional stories attempt to accomplish? In particular, what does the narrative of “Of the Coming of John” attempt to convey to readers of *Souls of Black Folk*?
- How is social class related to secularity among white Americans?

“Ethnicity, Assimilation, and Secularity”

- How is social class related to secularity among African Americans? How does the story of Langston Hughes help illustrate why the patterns between social class and secularity differ between white and black Americans?
- What is the relationship between immigrant status and secularity among Asian Americans? What do the affiliation patterns of Asian Americans across first, second, and third or later generations show with regard to how religion relates to assimilation for Asian immigrants?
- What is the relationship between assimilation and secularity among Hispanic Americans? Which factors make Hispanic Americans more likely to be secular?
- Why did David Tamayo decide to start Hispanic American Freethinkers? What are some of the issues he sees as unique to secularists of Hispanic ethnicity? What do his personal narrative, as well as his experiences with the group teach us about how ethnicity and secularity (or religiosity) intertwine?

“Gender and Sexuality”

SUMMARY

Chapter 7 opens with the story of Frances Wright, the first woman to publicly address “promiscuous audiences” in the U.S. Wright was radically progressive for her era, and also a harsh critic of organized religion and an advocate for secular organizations. Wright’s secularity and purported sexual licentiousness (she publicly advocated for divorce and allowing miscegenation) were used by politicians, the clergy, and the media in order to silence her. Her story helps illustrate how sexual purity and religiosity are linked in American culture. We then show the gendered nature of contemporary secularity, such that men are more likely to be secular than women; however, we complicate this by showing that among Americans who are politically liberal and have high levels of educational attainment, the gender ratios for secularity are roughly even. Further, research indicates that among gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans, the differences in secularity compared to heterosexuals are minor, and largely the result of gender rather than sexuality. This sheds light on a long-standing debate in the sociology of religion about gendered “nature” of religiosity (and secularity). We end by discussing the tragic fate of Frances Wright, and her lost place as a pioneering feminist and advocate for women’s rights.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What made Frances Wright such a controversial public figure? What were “promiscuous audiences” and how did women’s restrictions on addressing such groups impact their potential political influence?
- Who is more likely to be secular, men or women? How do gender ratios differ by type of secularity? Which social characteristics make men and women equally likely to be secular?
- What type of arguments were used to silence Frances Wright? What does this tell us about the connections between religion, gender, sexuality, and conventionality in American culture?

“Marriage, Family, and Social Networks”

SUMMARY

Chapter 8 looks at familial, marital, and peer networks in relation to secularity. The chapter begins with a discussion of patterns of interfaith marriage and outlines why religiously homogamous marriages tend to be more successful, as well as what this means for marriage among seculars. Next, the chapter demonstrates some of the “upward” generational effects of family by examining patterns of secularity based on having children, as well how marital status has a different relationship to secularity depending on gender. In effect, marriage and children push men toward religiosity and away from secularity, while these effects are much weaker among women. Next, the chapter outlines patterns of socialization in childhood, and how this relates to religiosity or secularity in adulthood. The end of the chapter discusses the role of secular peer networks in relation to secularity, and locates secular identities within patterns of social networks.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Which aspects of religiously homogamous marriages have been found to account for the higher rates of marital satisfaction and success? How could secular couples emulate these characteristics?
- How do marriage (and divorce) and having children effect the likelihood of secularity? How do these patterns differ between men and women? What do these differences indicate about how religion relates to family structures in a gendered way?
- Which attributes of socialization are more likely to make children become “religious rebels?”
- How do peer networks play a role in secularity? Are secular Americans more socially isolated than actively religious Americans?

“The (Explicit) Politics of Secularity”

SUMMARY

Chapter 9 opens with an interview with Cecil Bothwell, an openly “post-theist” city council member in Asheville, North Carolina. After Bothwell’s election to the council, political opponents tried to prevent him from taking his seat, citing a section of the state’s constitution that says public office holders cannot “deny the being of Almighty God.” Although this mandate has been rendered unconstitutional by judicial precedent, the episode raises interesting issues about how religion (and secularism) relate to American politics. Next, the chapter examines the political views of secular Americans in comparison to actively religious Americans to determine the primary areas of discord. On matters of size of government and economic policy, there is little difference between secular and religious Americans; however, there are substantial differences on environmental policies and especially in regard to matters of sexual politics. On these issues, American secularists are considerably more “liberal” than their religious counterparts. Regarding voting patterns, secular Americans have become consolidated as a liberal voting bloc in recent elections, but also tend to have lower rates of voting than religious Americans. The chapter ends by providing brief overviews of the activities of three prominent organized secular groups: the American Humanist Association, American Atheists, and the Secular Student Alliance. All of these groups have grown substantially in recent years. An interview with a founding director of the Secular Coalition for America helps outline the possibilities and limitations of organized secularism in the U.S.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- What type of political opposition did Cecil Bothwell face as a result of being openly non-theist? How has the Asheville city council changed since he was first elected?
- What are some of the similarities and differences in political views between actively religious and secular Americans? Which topics have the largest “gap” between the views of religious and secular Americans?
- What are some of the recent voting trends for secular Americans?
- How have organized secular groups changed in recent years?
- What do Lori Lipman Brown’s experiences in politics and as head of the Secular Coalition of America tell us about the opportunities for organized secular groups in formal politics? What does Lipman Brown advocate as the best strategy for achieving political goals?

‘A Secular, Cosmical Movement?’

SUMMARY

The Conclusion returns to a comparative perspective, looking at the U.S. compared to other countries with regard to levels of human development and secularity, showing that the recent rise in secularity has brought the U.S. squarely into the distribution with other Western countries on these matters. The chapter also returns to the four concerns raised at the beginning of the book by discussing the diversity of secularities, the implications of studying secularities for theories “of religion,” the necessarily cultural and political nature of secularity (and religiosity), and the sociological patterns of secularities. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications of the findings of the book for organized religion, organized secularity, and non-institutionalized secularity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- How does the U.S. compare to other countries with regard to HDI and levels of secularity? More generally, how do HDI and levels of secularity correlate?
- What do the authors argue is the role of foreign and domestic political conflict with regard to levels of religion and secularity in a given context?
- What do the authors argue for in regard to amending existing paradigms for the study “of religion?”
- What are some of the primary implications for organized religious and secular groups in the U.S. based on the findings of the book?