

Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists. How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 337 pages. ISBN: 978-0-691-16846-7.

The vast literature about the sociology and history of religions has surveyed the diverse religions and religiosities of the United States in the spirit of “exceptionalism” and also, has painted a picture of the promised land of religions. In his book *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation*, historian Leigh Eric Schmidt examines an area that is relatively unknown in the study of religious fields in the United States, namely the early history of American atheism. Schmidt focuses on certain influential personal histories by which he exposes the rocky road of the nonconformist thinking in the country. The secularistic storyline of the book covers nearly two hundred years, during which time, atheists, infidels, ungodly, unbelievers, secularists, or free-thinkers – by whatever names they have been called – have changed their position as public enemies to supporters of an acknowledged way of life. However, as Schmidt indicates, they still are a culturally isolated group of people, even though the freedom of religion already comprises the rights of the irreligious.

The introduction contextualizes the theme of atheism in America, provides background information by giving revealing statistics, and discusses the concept and ways of naming atheism that provides good insights into multidimensional secularism. The title of the book gets its explanation from a culturally meaningful poem, Edgar Lee Masters' “The Village Atheist,” which depicts the stereotypical characteristics of an unbeliever who stands against the Christian faith. The American right to freedom of religion essentially included the idea that one must believe in something but not believing in anything at all was not an option. Acceptable religious diversity included only Christians, Jews, and Muslims but not the irreligiousness – not to mention the indigenous religions. The atheists were seen as “the most dangerous sorts of wild beasts,” which made it undoubtedly very clear that the social eligibility preconceives a religious faith, as Schmidt points out.

The four main chapters of the book are dedicated to the personal histories of certain significant persons whom the author presents as the pioneers of secularism within the thoroughly Christian cultural context at the time. The author does not help the reader in the beginning by shortly introducing the persons to whom the chapters are dedicated. Thus, the best way to read the book is to read it like a novel. Schmidt has created a catching story, though.

His narration is rich in details, and his language is colorful. Newspapers, personal correspondence, and publications of these early secularists make up the material for Schmidt's historical research through the beginnings of American secularism. He brings up the voices of the sympathizers as well as those of the opponents.

The main figures of the book are Samuel Porter Putnam, a freethinker, critic and publicist; the cartoonist Watson Heston; Charles B. Reynold, an active preacher of secularism; and Elmina Drake Slenker, who brought up the discussion about sexual politics in the context of secularism. It is remarkable how deeply involved all these people used to be in the active religious life before their breakaway from it. The gender perspective in the history of American free-thinking is particularly considered in the last chapter. This chapter discusses influential women who took part in debating for both the freedom of religion and quite radical sexual politics that questioned the moral responsibility of their fellow male free-thinkers. The history of atheism has been very much a men's history in which an irreligious woman was simply regarded as an anomaly.

As Schmidt indicates in his work, later, in the 1920s and 1930s, a "village atheist" was no longer a mere literal character but referred to as active free-thinkers and became a culturally flexible category. The title of the book implies a broad field of activity. American atheism emerged from the grass-root level of the lower social classes rather than, for instance, from university campuses or the circles of intelligentsia. In that sense, Schmidt's message could be called "lived atheism" within the web of unofficial everyday encounters; the interests of the free-thinkers focused on the churchly regulations relating to ordinary people's daily life. Only later, these ideas were cultivated also in the academic context.

Today, academic studies recognize the atheists as a very heterogeneous group, indeed. Furthermore, the ever-growing group of the "Nones" is a fact. These are a rapidly increasing number of people to whom religion is simply irrelevant, whereas the outright atheists remain a minor group. According to Schmidt, approximately 7–8 percent of the population in the U.S. identifies themselves as atheists or agnostics, which is very close to the number of the free-thinkers of the nineteenth century. Typically, the atheists take distance from other minority groups, and because of their intransigence, they often experience discrimination. In a society where religious membership is a norm providing public respectability, confessing atheism most probably causes social risks. I think that it can easily be interpreted

as a socially isolating “costly signal” corresponding to the position of those who identify themselves with exclusive religious communities. Nevertheless, Schmidt shows that in many cases, the aim of the early secularists was to create more room for greater tolerance in the society.

During the last couple of decades, there can be seen a polarization regarding religion. On the one hand, the rapid growth of Pentecostal Christianity as well as the expansion of Islam have been two remarkable trends. On the other hand, the number of unbelievers has also increased at an accelerating rate, and belonging to the “Nones” is not as culturally stigmatizing as it used to be. In the U.S., President Obama’s objective to neutralize official ceremonies was seen as an approving signal for secularization in general. It remains to be seen what the era of the Number 45 (Trump) brings to the discussion on the atheistic values.

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Mark Shackleton, ed., *International Adoption in North American Literature and Culture: Transnational, Transracial, and Transcultural Narratives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. XIV + 306 pages. ISBN: 978-3-319-539941-0.

At least since the 2010 publication of Mark C. Jerng’s study of transracial adoption in the US, *Claiming Others: Transracial Adoption and National Belonging*, scholars have been examining histories and stories of adoption in the US and beyond its borders in ways that have frequently disrupted familiar chronologies, interrogated known concepts, and expanded the parameters for studying the US as an adopter nation. *International Adoption in North American Literature and Culture: Transnational, Transracial, and Transcultural Narratives* continues this practice with its collection of twelve historically and culturally grounded studies of adoption history and representations of adoption in a range of media, genres, and discourses. Taken together, these articles, written primarily by historians and literary scholars, provide a sense of both similarities and differences in the practices, experiences, and dynamics of international adoption and their representations. Uniformly strong, the articles also impart a sense of urgency about the issues they take on, for questions concerning identity, kinship, and family at the individual level resonate strongly at national and international