



Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism

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"Jacoby accomplishes her task with clarity, thoroughness, and an engaging passion."

-Los Angeles Times Book Review

At a time when the separation of church and state is under attack as never before, *Freethinkers* offers a powerful defense of the secularist heritage that gave Americans the first government in the world founded not on the authority of religion but on the bedrock of human reason. In impassioned, elegant prose, celebrated author Susan Jacoby traces more than two hundred years of secularist activism, beginning with the fierce debate over the omission of God from the Constitution. Moving from nineteenth-century abolitionism and suffragism through the twentieth century's civil liberties, civil rights, and feminist movements, *Freethinkers* illuminates the neglected achievements of secularists who, allied with tolerant believers, have led the battle for reform in the past and today.

Rich with such iconic figures as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Paine, and the once-famous Robert Green Ingersoll, *Freethinkers* restores to history the passionate humanists who struggled against those who would undermine the combination of secular government and religious liberty that is the glory of the American system.

Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism Details

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From Reader Review *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* for online ebook

Matthew Wesley says

This book was a shock to me in many ways. I was unaware of the very early opposition to the godless constitution of the United States. Quite unrealistically, I had thought the cultural wars debating the role of religion in government and the role of government in religion originated in the 20th century.

The book also introduced me to the works of Col. Robert Ingersoll, who seems to be an amazing speaker on the topics of religion, government, and liberty. I am quite appreciative that I have found this wonderful and forgotten source of secular eloquence.

My interest in politics and philosophy has been rekindled, and my apathy has melted away, because this book revealed to me how tenuous many of my treasured freedoms are. The constant push and pull of religious presence in government has been a consistent part of the United States history, and individual freedom of worship (and lack of worship) has not always been supported. This implies that the same situation could occur today and in the near future. The biographical sections on prominent secularists prove that individual action can make some difference in public opinion and government policy.

Broodingferret says

This book makes a good follow up to Jennifer Michael Hecht's book *Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson*. *Freethinkers* is both an engaging treatment of the influence of secularist thought through American history and an impassioned polemic against the dangers of mixing religious and political power. Despite her passion for secular government and her clearly evident lack of religious belief, Jacoby treats the topic of religion in general with respect, saving her ire purely for beliefs and creeds that would ignore the wisdom of separating church and state. She also does a wonderful job of revealing many of America's influential atheists and agnostics, people who are all too often highly edited (like Thomas Paine) or completely omitted (like Robert Ingersoll) from historical works on USA. A must for any American history buff, as well as for anyone looking for a good argument as to why it protects everyone's freedom, including that of the religious, the keep church and state separate.

Deborah says

Excellent introductory history. I feel cheated that I never learned about the contributions of Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Lucretia Mott in more than a glossed-over fashion in my American history studies, nor of Robert Green Ingersoll at all.

These people, along with a host of better-known names such as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, as well as other lesser-knowns, had the courage of their convictions despite the social pressures of living in an overtly religious society. One point Jacoby's book makes, however, is that those pressures are now greater than ever. Who is going to have the audacity to stand up for separation of church and state in an age when

the media are so beholden to their perceived public and to advertising dollars?

Politicians today certainly do not. It is depressing to think that late-18th century political leaders were ahead of ours in their acceptance and advocacy of Enlightenment principles.

I cannot shake my memory of some blonde in go-go boots, a CNN anchor named, I think, Alex something, making the absurdly false statement that the words "under God" have been in the Pledge of Allegiance since "time immemorial." And this was CNN, not Fox, for pity's sake. Even I knew at the time that those words were added in the 1950's as a McCarthyist reaction to communism. If you didn't, or would like to know more truth about American history, read this book.

Joseph Stieb says

Jacoby's history of American secularism is an openly polemical book with a clear agenda. She wants to bring out the strong secular undercurrent in many key parts of American history, most importantly the founding. Overall the book is a success in this regard, presenting a side of history that most Americans probably don't think about. As a secularist myself, it's empowering to see that "my people" have their own history and traditions in America. Jacoby helps modern secularists arm themselves with their own history and find precedents for social activism upon which they can act today.

The most important part of Jacoby's argument are the chapters about the Constitution. Jacoby convincingly shows that America was founded as a secular republic, not a "Christian nation" as many have claimed since the founding. At the time, most state constitutions and basically every country in the world had either a specifically religious character or at least a set of religious qualifications for holding office. Building on Virginia's statement of religious freedom, the founders established key secular provisions in the Constitution, including no religious test for office, the establishment clause, and the complete omission of the word God from the document. Jacoby emphasizes that these moves were radical at the time, but that the founders were following the ideals of the Enlightenment in taking these steps because they understood that empowering a specific religion would undoubtedly corrode democracy and freedom for all. Today's politicians are far more comfortable with explicit religious influences in politics (Scalia and Bush, for instance) than the founders were.

Jacoby then tries to rehabilitate the secular currents in major movements and figures of US history. She shows that abolitionism, feminism, and civil rights movements were all influenced by people who were either secular, unorthodox, or Deist. This is where her argument runs into some problems. It's supposed to be a history of American secularism, but many of these movements were dominated by openly religious groups and individuals. They may have been influenced by secular ideas, but it's hard to say that William Lloyd Garrison, for instance, really fits the category. The problem with the term "freethinker" is that it can be applied to anyone who criticizes established authority and ideas, even if they lack a secular bent. Jacoby

employs the term freethinker to broaden the tent of American secularism, but it leads to a misuse of the term secular. Nevertheless, Jacoby shows that major freethinking figures in American history have either been overlooked, or their criticisms of religion obscured by political correctness, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Robert Ingersoll, Walt Whitman, and Thomas Paine. She makes a much stronger case that American feminism has been far more consciously secular than other social movements, given how tightly linked religion and the oppression of women have been in history.

Jacoby does a good job staying on point in this book, as she easily could have spent dozens of pages ripping on religious figures in American history. She does, however, make two interesting if broad points about the conflict between religion and secularism in American history. First, she shows that in our various "culture wars" in the 20th century that religious establishments have lagged far behind the general public on key social justice and intellectual issues, including women's rights, civil rights for minorities, evolution, and homosexual rights. There may have been plenty of individually religious people on the right side of history, but the establishments were usually on the wrong side, despite their claims to the contrary today. This fits nicely with my argument that religions have slowly moved away from their fundamentalist cores by embracing liberal and secular ideas not of their making that are far more humane but contrary to the sacred texts of those religions. Second, Jacoby shows that secularists have seriously underestimated the commitment and resiliency of religious fundamentalism. After the Scopes Trial humiliated fundamentalism in the 1920, many secularists figured that it would never return. Obviously, the waves of fundamentalism since then have proved them wrong. She warns that today's secularists should not make the same mistake of assuming that history is moving in any particular direction on its own accord.

Hats off to Jacoby for a very thought-provoking read. If only she had thought of a different title/framework than the condescending and useless term freethinkers, she would have had an excellent argument throughout the book. 370 pages.

Tyler Anderson says

I'm taking a break from this book. It's not long, but it's been kind of a slog for me, and I have trouble getting very far at a stretch. The information is relatively interesting, but the writing seems to wander around, almost verging on "filler" at times. It also has the timbre of a condescending talk-radio monologue; it's sprinkled with asides that might have been framed as interesting comparisons, but instead come across as prissy freshman self-righteousness. I might finish it later, maybe I'll skip ahead and cherry-pick. Most likely, I'll just let it go. Too bad.

Book says

Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism by Susan Jacoby

"Freethinkers" is a fascinating historical account of the role of freethinkers in United States. This book provides an important narrative of the impact of freethinkers in the creation of the first secular government in the world. This 448-page book is composed of the following twelve chapters: 1. Revolutionary Secularism, 2. The Age of Reason and Unreason, 3. Lost Connections: Anticlericalism, Abolitionism, and Feminism, 4. The Belief and Unbelief of Abraham Lincoln, 5. Evolution and Its Discontents, 6. The Great Agnostic and the Golden Age of Freethought, 7. Dawn of the Culture Wars, 8. Unholy Trinity: Atheists, Reds, Darwinists,

9. Onward, Christian Soldiers, 10. The Best Years of Our Lives, 11. Culture Wars Redux, and 12. Reason Embattled.

Positives:

1. A great book from cover to cover.
2. A well-written, meticulously researched book.
3. An important book about our history, and Susan Jacoby does it justice, bravo!
4. The book is filled with relevant facts and fascinating tidbits. I can't stress that enough.
5. Great historical writing, elegant prose with conviction, passion and logical reasoning. A true freethinker.
6. A tribute to so many freethinking-Americans who contributed so much yet are mentioned so little.
7. Great quotes.
8. Yes you can be a true patriot without religion.
9. Knowledge is power. Read great books like this one and get empowered.
10. One of the greatest achievements by on this planet, the establishment of a secular government by Adams and Jefferson.
11. The impact and permanent contributions of Thomas Paine.
12. Evolution always puts a smile on my face. Thank you Darwin.
13. The legacy of the "The Great Agnostic" Robert Ingersoll.
14. Personally enlightening history of the feminist movement propelled by courageous freethinking women so many to name but my personal favorite is Elizabeth Cady Stanton.
15. The evil of slavery.
16. How liberal Protestants along with freethinkers propelled science.
17. The separation of church and state.
18. The Scopes trial and its impact.
19. Women's reproductive rights.
20. The impact of the religious right.
21. The civil rights movement.
22. Supreme Court decisions.
23. Faith-based initiatives exposed.
24. Extensive bibliography.
25. Links work great.

Negatives:

1. An investment of time is required but it's so well worth it!

In summary, Susan Jacoby is one of the main reasons I enjoy reading as much as I do. This is now one of my all-time favorite books. It's enlightening, inspirational and a treat to read from cover to cover. What a wonderful book that not only provides valuable historical lessons it also fills a void of our American heritage. I can't thank Susan Jacoby enough for her valuable contribution.

Further recommendations: "People's History of the United States" by Howard Zinn, "Doubt" by Jennifer Hecht, "American Fascists" by Chris Hedges, "Republican Gomorrah..." by Max Blumenthal, and "The Conservative Assault on the Constitution" by Erwin Chemerinsky.

Joshua Buhs says

I appreciate the point of view of this book, and it is truly sad that no one could, today, stand up and celebrate

America's secular foundations.

Having said that, the book is not particularly interesting or persuasive. It is a history of so-called forgotten freethinkers (read secular humanists), although I am not sure the degree to which Thomas Paine and William Garrison are forgotten or ignored. (I'll give her Ingersoll.) Nor am I sure the degree to which Abraham Lincoln's conflicted views of religion--his agnosticism, call it--is not recognized.

The book moves from the Revolutionary period, the post-Revolutionary era, the Civil War, the 'Golden Age of Free thought'--1875 to 1914--then to the Conservative reaction and red-baiting that characterized so much of the 20th century. She points out that in the nineteenth century abolitionism, suffragism, and anti-clericism were interrelated, which undergirded the flourishing of free thought.

She underplays the role played by religious minorities in protecting religious and civil liberties--the Jehovah's Witnesses, for instance. And, of course, without the Fortean, there's no weird tangents--only a steady march of progress and retreat.

Still, it's a good basic history and a needed corrective.

Kerrie says

4.5 stars

My main reaction to this book: "Why didn't we learn **ANY OF THIS** in history class?" And well, the answer's fairly obvious.

Jacoby did a superlative job presenting a portrait of American history, this time including the atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, humanists, and secular Jews who often played as large a role in the titanic struggles in our nation's history (abolition, women's rights) and yet have been written out of the record in favor of a narrative that such social change came about by devoutly religious people propelled by the strength of their righteous convictions.

For instance, Ernestine Rose was one of the founders of the feminist movement, standing by the side of Anthony, Stanton, and Mott. Anthony looked up to her. But she's totally ignored in accounts of that movement. Could it be that she said stuff like this?

"It is an interesting and demonstrable fact, that all children are atheists and were religion not inculcated into their minds, they would remain so."

Elizabeth Cady Stanton is famous and ubiquitous today as a founder of the movement, but she was pretty much erased out of the history until the 1970s when the second wave of feminism "re-discovered" her. She was always outspoken about her anti-religion views, but finally crossed the line when she published *The Woman's Bible* which alienated the Christian portion of the movement, headed by Lucy Stone.

Susan B. Anthony, who was political enough to keep her freethinking/atheist opinions in the private sector in the form of letters, has always been front-and-center in the history of women's rights.

This was by far my favorite chapter of the book, but the entirety of the work is outstanding. Jacoby's prose is very readable (not academic), and the **best** part: You learn something on every page.

It's difficult not to feel sad at the optimism during the Golden Age of Freethought in the late 19th century when the end of religion and priests was being predicted within their lifetimes, when they were confident that reason and logic would prevail over myths and superstition. Jacoby demonstrates that although the record of history is changed over time to favor the religious aspect, there have always been players whose motivation is not belief in a god, but belief in humanity.

I can't recommend this book enough, whether you're agnostic, religious, or atheist, if you're curious about the other side of our nation's history.

Half a star is deducted for the long section covering Walt Whitman which slowed down my momentum. Even atheism can't make a poet or poetry interesting to me.

Russell says

Before I started reading this book I was afraid that it might be more an anti-religion tirade than a history book. I'm happy to say that my assumption was unfounded. Jacoby's history of secularism in America is well researched, mostly unbiased, and nicely written. When she occasionally strays away from straight history and into editorialism, her thoughts are well thought out and soundly argued. It isn't until the final chapter, however, that she really steps completely out of history and into personal commentary. This chapter might not be for everyone. However, I think think all Americans, no matter what their personal beliefs, would learn a lot from this book and find it fascinating, as I did.

Billrogers says

I get so weary of hearing people say that the United States of America is a Christian nation. It is not.

Freethinkers explains this essential fact in an interesting fashion.

Susan Jacoby chronicles secularist thought from the revolutionary period until the present, bringing it to life by profiling Americans like Bob Ingersoll, "The Great Agnostic."

I strongly recommend this book to everyone. Those who believe that the USA is a Christian nation will learn that it is not; those who know the truth will gain knowledge that will help them defend their position.

As explained by Jacoby, the United States Constitution is a secular document because of what it does say and because of what it does not say.

The first explicit secularist provision is contained in Article 6, Section 3, which states that elected and appointed officials "shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."

The second explicit secularist provision of the Constitution is the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights. The

First Amendment's prohibition against governmental interference with religious liberty cannot be detached from the body of the Constitution and its prohibition of religious tests for public office.

The word "God" does not appear in the United States Constitution. The document's silence on the deity was historically and culturally significant. The framers of the Constitution, our founding fathers, refused to invoke any form of divine sanction.

The secularism of the Constitution was quite controversial during the ratification process. Many state ratifying conventions attempted to amend the Constitution by declaring that governmental power was derived from God or Jesus Christ. However, the Constitution was ratified without any reference to a deity, and a specific prohibition against imposing any religious test for public office.

The myth that the United States is a Christian nation is untrue. It is a secular nation whose governmental power is derived FROM ITS CITIZENS ... and not from any deity.

Igor Faynshteyn says

In this book, Susan Jacoby examines the beginnings of United States as a nation through historical perspective, chiefly focused on its secular roots and its founding fathers. From the beginning of the book, it becomes obvious and clear that the book is thoroughly researched with rich information, including many quotations from such people as Paine, Jefferson, Ingersoll, Stanton, Goldman and many more. It is through quotes and their interpretation/analysis that Susan Jacoby is able to construct a picture of the United States as a secular country.

In addition, she also provides relevant statistics, passages from the Constitution, quotes from various religious leaders as well as secularists to provide background and evidence for her analysis. She also briefly talks about some Supreme Court cases regarding religious matters. All in all, Susan Jacoby demonstrates a rich scholarship in the history of the US and it is through her dedicated and committed research to the subject that we are able to determine the early inception of the US as well as its social progress over the years.

Alan says

Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism presents Susan Jacoby's cheerful, well-informed voice in a great review of American history from a secular and liberal point of view, extending from Thomas Paine to George W. Bush. Jacoby is quite clear in showing that many conservative values – anti-abortion, anti-communism, pro-guns, anti-science, and others – stem from the belief that the Christian religion should be a dominant force in American government.

Jacoby begins with the stories of Thomas Paine and James Madison, who led to movement for the separation of church and state in the US constitution. She explained how many Virginians wanted to collect a tax to fund churches in the state and how Thomas Jefferson successfully resisted them.

Freethinkers has a terrific discussion of how William Garrison was the only abolitionist who supported the new women's rights movement led by Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Ernestine Rose (a Polish Jew/atheist). Jacoby explained that most of the male abolitionists were entrenched in religious groups that relegated women to an inferior role. When Lucretia Mott, the first woman in the 1830's to speak publicly to large crowds about women's rights, she was religious, she was labeled as an infidel.

Another chapter begins with a short biography of Clarence Darrow and a well-written discussion of the Scopes trial. I learned that the Scopes trial was only a singular event because the news media covered it, since censorship of evolution had been going on for many years. Tennessee had passed a new law banning the teaching of evolution, Scopes saw his job being threatened and the ACLU wanted a test case to flex its muscle. Jacoby explained that the fundamentalist movement gained a lot of informal momentum from the trial.

Later Jacoby explored how Emma Goldman first inspired Margaret Sanger (who was raised a Catholic and a mother of 11 children) but Sanger split with Goldman (who was sent back to Russia) because Sanger wanted to take the cause of birth control public (she coined the term, birth control) and association with Goldman would hurt the cause. Jacoby also explained how the Catholics were once a hated minority (such as Irish immigrants) but became more mainstream as they joined others in opposing birth control.

Mitch Rogers says

A great book that not only explains the role of religion and non-religion in American history but also maps out the coalitions of sects and societies that have formed and realigned repeatedly in our history. At times Jacoby does get polemical, but the history itself remains rock solid.

Stuart says

This is an excellent and fair history of American secularism. Susan Jacoby reclaims American history from the religious right. She writes of freethinkers, deists, atheists, agnostics and other dissenters and their involvement in the drafting of the constitution, the abolition and suffragist movements, the progressive and freethinker movements, and the attacks on secularism from the red scare, the Scopes Trial and McCarthyism. This is a great book for those that have bought the lie that the US is a Christian Nation and that there has been a secularist coup in the last 30 to take God out of the public square.

Jacob J. says

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. I cannot overstate how insightful, useful and dare I say, necessary 'Freethinkers' truly is. Not only does Jacoby lay out the best defense of secular values that has ever been written (with the possible exception of the Constitution itself), but she also offers an extremely thorough account of American history through the vision of some of America's most important figures from the past and present.

It is strange to think, how even the late-nineteenth century seemed to have a better understanding of America's secular foundation than we do today, with people like Robert Ingersoll, whom Jacoby rightly laments has not earned a proper place in American history, nor has there been a politician to fill his shoes up to this point. I was captivated by Jacoby's brilliant candor on the very first page of the introduction when she stated, "it is impossible to imagine such a forthright celebration of America's secularist heritage [referring to Ingersoll] today, as the apostles of religious correctness attempt to infuse every public issue... with their theological values." This statement is obvious with the vocal groups of so-called 'value voters' of our current day and with Bush's faith based initiative, his blocking of stem-cell research, and even referring to military action as a "crusade". 'Secular humanists' may as well be child molesters in the eyes of far too many politicians (and voters) in our country today. Religious faith is a must if one seeks political office, and moreover, suggesting that the separation of church and state is "absolute" as JFK did, seems like it wouldn't go over well at all in these times. I understand the majority of Americans are Christians of varying denominations, but we have been caught in an embarrassingly pathetic political system where wisdom, honesty, and experience take a back seat to religious faith when seeking the presidency. Ignorant voters proudly admit that they don't know much about politics but that they will vote for a certain candidate because of their faith. It is shameful and depressing, in my opinion, to hear such pious lunacy.

It is remarkable to think that leaders such as Thomas Jefferson (who deliberately omitted mention of God from the constitution), Abraham Lincoln (who refused to join a church) or even Kennedy would probably have difficulty in the primaries of either party today. It is easy to point to public speeches that presidents have made and say "he mentioned God, clearly he is a Christian (or believer)", but with some due research, it would not be so easy to declare a substantive number of our past presidents believers in God, and certainly not devout Christians. In another depressing bit of truth, Jacoby points to the timidity of many freethinkers of the last century, in contrast to those of the nineteenth century that allowed religion to claim victory over secularism in the progress of social movements and civil rights.

I found it rather touching in the first chapter entitled 'Revolutionary Secularism' to read how achieved Adams and Jefferson felt, up to the end of their lives, for their roles in the establishment of the world's first wholly secular government. There really isn't anything to suggest that swearing in on the Bible should have been mandatory, nor should any proclamation of a particular religion. However, the truth is that even those that were not religious had to emphasize their respect for religion if they wanted to garnish any support for separation of church and state. But even in response to these careful secularists, religious conservatives humorously, if also troublingly, cite the First Amendment's "establishment clause" to mean the founders intended "only to protect religion from government- not government from religion." These kinds of statements of course ignore the prohibition of religious tests for public office. People who think that religious rules should be imposed on government and a country's entire population take the obvious course of declaring that "God is the ultimate authority", and for a lot of supporters, this is more than enough to put all their power into fighting secularism.

Chapter 2 is essentially a brief biography of one of the most under-appreciated men in American history, Thomas Paine. Paine strongly discouraged monarchy and expressed support for the French Revolution in the late 1700s. This backfired however, when the Revolution turned very violent and beheadings with the Guillotine had begun. Paine went to France to speak against the violence and was imprisoned himself, but was released because of his earlier support for their cause. Paine, because of his explicitly secularist views, has been marginalized in history, and whose memory was kept alive by small groups, and rare men like Robert Ingersoll. To this day, I bet not too many people would recognize his name, let alone what he stood for (and if so, it would probably ring a bell as the man who inspired Glenn Beck to write his own 'Common Sense' book, but I won't get into that now). His ideas should have a larger place in the public circle when the issue of church-and-state is discussed.

I am going on at length so I will skip a couple chapters involving social movements and Abraham Lincoln's ambiguous stance on religion and skip to chapter 5, 'Evolution and Its Discontents'. It is no surprise why Darwin's theory of Evolution posed such a threat to religious people, certainly Biblical literalists because it "offered an unambiguous opportunity to explain in natural terms what had, for aeons, been explained solely in supernatural terms." It cut to the very core of religious belief, in that a system- natural selection- could involve such suffering and mass extinction and still point to an omnipotent, benevolent creator. Theologians and religious scientists have been trying to reconcile evolution and religion since Darwin's time, but in my opinion, it makes perfect sense why religious people harbor such antipathy towards the revolutionary discovery. The opposition to evolution that is maintained to this day is astounding, but not incredibly surprising. I hope we don't allow our school system to be bullied by vociferous antagonists much longer, because the price we are paying is already clear, in the ignorance so many Americans display in the fields of science.

My favorite part of this book that I was previously unfamiliar with was the part about 'Comstock Laws'. This battle over censorship pitted Anthony Comstock and many "upstanding Christians" against secularists and some of my favorite writers (including Mark Twain and George Bernard Shaw). "Obscenity" and "blasphemy" are two things that are more accepted now by society in general. Some terrific writers from Comstock's time all the way through today would be banned and censored and perhaps not even published if these laws were upheld. I was unaware of these proposed laws before this book, and I am very grateful they were defeated by the brave people in support of free speech and who understood the importance of literature.

It seemed (and still seems) like common practice for religious conservatives to attribute something that threatened their faith (like Evolution) with an existential threat of the time (like Communism). Jennings Bryan raised a huge ordeal, issuing warning of a "scientific Soviet" that threatened religion in America (referring to the teaching of evolution in schools). This was a year before the Scopes "Monkey Trial" in 1925, some time ago, but allegations of this sort are not in short supply today either. One could copy and paste any number of inauspicious words to replace "soviet" in an accusation like Bryans': Scientific "elitists", "humanists" and "fascists". These are all words used in a negative connotation, some unjustly so, to make a point that "scientism" has taken over and is trying to keep religious dissenters quit.

Another very useful fact stated in chapter 9, 'Onward, Christian Soldiers' addresses the common defense of America as a Christian nation by citing the 'under God' part in the Pledge of Allegiance. It is necessary to know that 'under God' was not added until 1954, while the McCarthy red scare was at its most extreme. It was added purely as a way to differentiate us from the "Godless Soviets".

In many conservative religious circles, separation of church and state has become synonymous with 'anti-Christianity'. There is not merit to this, other than the fact that Christians are the primary ones who oppose it. This is the fear that Jews and members of the ACLU had when they would endorse the wall of separation. The fear has worked for a long time, and the timidity isn't easily overcome now, but if we want to maintain our freedoms of speech and religion, such timidity must be overcome. I for one do not feel as if America is under grave threat of theocracy, but I am not even comfortable with the baby steps that people are taking in their attempt to get us down that road.

The attempts to include all religions into a national system of believers of some type or another are just as preposterous as trying to make America a Christian nation. This would obviously isolate those that have no religious affiliation and render them even bigger social outcasts than they are already perceived to be. (An example of this being Mrs. Roosevelt's idea to come up with a prayer that children of all faiths could participate in without feeling excluded). Bah! Aside from the issue of children supposedly having religious faith, this is merely asinine pandering that supports the religious divisions in our world (even while

pretending to be unified). Parents would still find a way to complain if they felt their children were being told to pray to a different God than the one they worshipped, even if no specific god was explicitly invoked in the prayer.

A very telling thing about history and religion is how easy it was for segregationists and slave-holders to cite the Bible in support of their views. There are elaborate and unfounded stories involving Noah's son Ham (a belief prevalent in the Mormon Church until recently) that because of his adultery, he was punished with dark skin, emblematic of eternal darkness and banished to Africa where the descendants of Ham were cursed forever. This is, of course ludicrous, but it wasn't always thought to be so, and we would do well to remember that when we find ourselves underestimating the effects adherence to scripture can have. It's easy for either side of a debate to shout Bible verses at each other, and I think this proves that there is no clear answer to moral questions for us in the Bible.

"Far from representing a tradition that goes back to the founding fathers, the ubiquitous and obligatory invocations of God by American public officials today represents a radical break with the secularist ideals that formed the basis of the American constitutional government." This is one of my favorite sentences from the entire book. This was in response to Antonin Scalia's speech defending the proposition that America is a Christian nation. He cited easily dismissed examples like American currency having the inscription "In God We Trust", the pledge of allegiance, and then of course the fact that politicians are essentially required to invoke God at the end of every speech. The comedian George Carlin refers to this phenomenon as a "verbal tick" and I must say, that doesn't seem too far off. "God bless you, and God bless the United States of America." I long for the day when public leaders of this country won't be pressured to espouse their religious views as if it's the most important factor in getting elected (although I would still like to know what views they held). It is a well-known fact that an atheist would scarcely have a chance to win the presidency at this point in history, and I do hope that such a prejudice can be done away with. But as long as we have people willing to vote for faith over policy; as long as we have preachers telling their congregations who to vote for, how to interpret scripture, how to feel about social issues, this hope seems tragically far-fetched. We have no shortage of latter-day Billy Grahams' and credulous followers to demonize people who have different values and ideas than them. The stakes are high, and we need to see more people speaking up on behalf of secularization if we don't want it completely choked out by the boot-heel of religious correctness and propaganda.

There is an appendix to this book, an elegant eulogy given by Robert Ingersoll at Walt Whitman's funeral. A eulogy as touching and profound as any religiously motivated one. We have a rich heritage in this country that involves many different viewpoints, ideologies and beliefs. It was founded on the idea that no one of these ideologies or beliefs can rule over the country as an impermeable force. This would be, of course, a dictatorship. Why so many fundamentalist Christians in this country can't see this is beyond me, as they are often the ones who are so gung-ho on freedom. To further the irony, they equate their fundamental beliefs with "true patriotism".

There are many points and many people that I have not addressed in this review. Indeed, there are people that weren't even mentioned in the book that deserve recognition, but the book was truly astounding and beneficial, both for my historical perspective and secular values that I hold. I felt even more enlightened when I closed this book, and if I recall correctly, I even engaged in a light applause in the presence of only myself. I would recommend it any American; especially any religious person who likes to claim that secularism is the enemy and that America was founded as a Christian country. They may not find a better counter-point to everything they think about this country.
