Jacques Berlinerblau


According to Jacques Berlinerblau, secularism is in a dismal condition in the United States. He argues that, after enjoying a golden age from the 1940s to the 1970s, secularism today finds itself out of favour with the Supreme Court, with the Obama White House and especially with Congress. Besides its unpopularity with all three branches of government, most North Americans decidedly do not favour secularism. Moreover, he claims, the term itself is poorly understood and is often equated with atheism, godlessness, liberalism, ‘separationism’ and even, ironically, jihad. After offering this dire diagnosis, Berlinerblau supplies his own definition of secularism, traces secularism’s history in the United States, and finally offers a political plan for the rebirth of secularism.

Berlinerblau’s definition of secularism is: ‘a political philosophy, which, at its core, is preoccupied with, and often deeply suspicious of, any and all relations between government and religion’ (p. xvi). Berlinerblau is flexible on the question of means: some may pursue a policy of ‘separationism’, in which the wall between church and state is sturdily built up; while other secularists might experiment with ‘accommodationism’, in which all religions, within certain legal parameters, are aided by the state but without prejudice in favour of any particular religion. The primary goal in either case is non-establishment or disestablishment. This goal, as compared to the wall of separation, is more clearly constitutional, more politically feasible and more popular with the North American people. Berlinerblau denotes two basic motivations behind disestablishmentarianism: the yin of the preservation of social and political order and the yang of the maximization of freedom of and freedom from religion.

Berlinerblau places emphasis on what secularism is not. The following facile equations must be negated: secularism is strict separation, secularism equals atheism, secularism is liberalism and secularism is synonymous with the Democratic Party. As noted above, a secularist is committed to disestablishmentarianism, but not necessarily to separation. Berlinerblau believes that
(for now at least) secularists would be wise not to insist on a wall of separation between church and state and instead to experiment with accommodationism. Secularism is also not to be equated with atheism, especially not with the aggressive and polarizing New Atheism. Berlinerblau’s book is highly political (in the best ‘art of the possible’ sense) and pragmatic. As he notes, secularism needs numbers; it needs people. To this end, secularism must tap into the huge demographic of religious moderates; thus, a successful secularist movement of the future will feature both atheists and theists. Similarly, secularism must include liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, and Libertarians as well. Berlinerblau takes a surprisingly dim view of the policies of Barack Obama regarding church-state relations and believes that secularism cannot assume the support of the Democratic Party and must court the support of all possible allies.

Berlinerblau’s history of secularism begins with five great architects: Martin Luther, Roger Williams, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Berlinerblau does an admirable job of summarizing the intellectual contributions these figures have made to the concept of secularism. Two other notable figures in Berlinerblau’s historical sketch are George Jacob Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh. In Berlinerblau’s assessment of our current situation, we have too much Bradlaugh (in the form of New Atheism) and not enough Holyoake (namely moderate voices, like that of Berlinerblau himself). Berlinerblau concludes his book with a practical ‘twelve-step plan’ for the political rebirth of secularism. This plan focuses on addressing the people problem of secularism by attracting new supporters and building alliances.

The strength of Berlinerblau’s book is the helpful history of the concept of secularism that he offers and the clarifications given as to the precise meaning and purpose of secularism. Equally admirable is the fairness with which Berlinerblau considers questions such as the constitutional support for a wall of separation between government and religion and the place of the view of Jefferson and Madison in the context of the Founding Fathers as a whole.

One could question the descriptive accuracy of Berlinerblau’s critical diagnosis of secularism. We might ask whether the situation really is so grim; whether the Supreme Court is largely deaf to the concerns of secularism and whether the Obama White House is in fact a foe. More problematically, throughout the book, the great enemy of secularism is identified as the Revivalist movement. Revivalists are politically and religiously conservative Evangelical Protestants, allied with conservative Catholics, Jews, Mormons and others. One of the book’s weaknesses is that the nature and motivations of this group are often alluded to but hardly explored. The Revivalists are the opponents against whom secularism must strategize and work to build effective