

**GABRIEL C. GHERASIM**

**IDEOLOGICAL PEREGRINATIONS OF THE  
RELENTLESS AMERICAN VILLAGE ATHEIST**

**Gabriel C. Gherasim**

Babeş-Bolyai University, Department of International Relations and German Studies, Cluj, Romania.

**Email:** gabriel.gherasim@ubbcluj.ro

**Abstract:** Review of Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016).

**Key Words:** freethinkers, infidels, atheism, secularism, Robert Ingersoll, Samuel P. Putnam, Watson Heston, Charles B. Reynolds, Elmina D. Slenker, Leigh Eric Schmidt.

The literature dedicated to the historical evolution, ideological development and quotidian practices of atheism in the United States of America has been rather inconsequential and underrated in comparison with the overall thorough commitment of theologians, intellectuals and historians towards unfolding the plural existence of religious denominations, dogmatic orientations and transformative conventions and processes in the New World. Overwhelmingly understood as the mainstream tradition of the country, religiousness has become one of the most consistent ingredients in understanding both the sacredness of public and private life and the secularist development of the federal state and its institutions. Originating in the Puritan narrative of the early seventeenth century and its pledge of allegiance towards a new divine and civic credo, the American religious mindset has assertively been foundational, inspirational and regulatory about the moral, political, ecclesiastical, societal and cultural fabric of the American way of life. Accordingly, believers overpowered unbelievers, religion overshadowed irreligion, faithful citizenship prevailed over dissenting freethinking and the saga of atheists, infidels, secularists and humanists has remained at best marginal, fragmentary and inconclusive. In a pervasively secularized world, one coherent and synthetic narrative of atheism and its various occurrences looks like a work in progress.

One recent contribution to the intricate story of atheism in the United States acknowledges the troublesome posture of any intellectual endeavor in this respect. Leigh Eric Schmidt's work, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation*, implicitly accepts the sheer impossibility of reconstructing a methodologically unified narrative of atheism in the United States (Schmidt 2016, 24) and undertakes the mission of depicting the humanist, irreverent-like atmosphere of infidel thought especially within the course of the last three decades of nineteenth century America. The resulting strategy is that of sketching counterpointed and intersecting stories, coalescing biographical notes, ideological orientations of various figures and the multi-faceted versions of unbelieving in the age of positivism, humanism, Darwinism and enlightened secularism. The community environment is precisely what the four main characters of the book (i.e., Samuel P. Putnam, Watson Heston, Charles B. Reynolds, Elmina D. Slenker) share in common: the „village atheist” becomes both the explanatory trope and the identifiable location-type character that make them marginal and unorthodox pariahs. Akin to an instructive approach in intellectual history, the book „grounds itself between the rustic infidels of the late Enlightenment and the romanticized nonconformists of the 1920s and 1930s” (Schmidt 2016, 16). In turn, the selected heroes might escape any mainstream scrutiny of the history of atheism itself; figures like Robert Ingersoll (the „stirring lecturer” and the intellectual lieder of unbelievers), Francis Ellingwood Abbot (the founder of the weekly journal *Index* in 1870 - „one of the primary platforms for

defining liberal secularism as a movement” - Schmidt 2016, 38) or Elizabeth Cady Stanton (the author of the *Woman’s Bible*, two volumes, 1895 and 1898) are rather ornamental and narrative-guiding personages. Roughly within the timeframe 1870s-1920s, Schmidt seizes the apogee and the starting moment of the decline of atheist secularism as coincident with Ingersoll’s death in 1899, while the first decades of the twentieth century are fictionalized as an appendix of the movement endowed with a nostalgic aura (Schmidt 2016, 251).

The ideological, intellectual, historical and biographical values of the book might be purportedly augmented by possible alternative readings complementing what, in my view, stands for the various instantiations and semantic luxuriance of atheism as a fluid movement. One such reading would resurrect past notable exemplifications of outright infidelity and make probable connections with the evolving and most recent manifestations of unbelief. Consequently, reflective forays in the history of ideas should trace back the development of unbelief in the United States to the study of „natural philosophers, deistic rationalists, and humanistic moralists” (Schmidt 2016, 17); accordingly, the figure of Giordano Bruno stands for exemplary martyrdom, the Enlightenment secularists (Voltaire, Hume, Spinoza) unveil the true nature of inquisitive rationality as opposed to dogmatism and bigotry, and romantic poets like Shelley and Coleridge would deny the traditional tenets of Christian faith (Schmidt 2016, 30,34). In the United States, the infidels’ mentors were Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and Ralph W. Emerson. Thomas Paine, the father of them all, is credited with authoring the „originating manifesto” (Schmidt 2016, 85) of infidelity, *The Age of Reason*; Jefferson, the „agrarian” (sic!) prophet of America, took a deistic and liberal stance as the main proponent of religious freedom encapsulated in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights; and Emerson, endorsing „religious feeling and soulful epiphany” (Schmidt 2016, 31), turned the tide towards mystic sentimentalism and spiritualism. For Samuel Putnam, the wavering secularist pilgrim in search for the truth of life, John Bunyan’s famous allegory, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, would become the very model of personal transfiguration in reverse (Schmidt 2016, 27), while John Locke’s excommunication of atheists has remained one of the cornerstones of Protestant mentality.

The intellectual roots notwithstanding, the explosion of anti-Christian movements took place in the 1870s and 1880s. The species of new cultural characters in the United States included, without necessarily being limited to, freethinkers, rationalists, agnostics, atheists, liberals, secularists, materialists, philanthropists, positivists, Darwinists and humanists, each conducting their peculiar line of thought against dogmatic theology and denominational establishments of American religious life. The secular reforms they shared pointed at enhancing freedom of speech as a legal principle according to the First Constitutional amendment,

eliminating religious tests in trial courts, freeing public schools from any religious entanglement, and separating civil rights and citizenship from any religious conditioning (Schmidt 2016, 11). On the other hand, their communal ideological views hinted at denying Christian orthodoxy and biblical authority, regulating the church-state relationship, promoting scientific investigation, verificationism and fallibilism, denouncing both Catholic and Protestant abuses, universalizing the secular values of „equal rights, civil liberties and humanitarian goodwill”, and rejecting the false afterlife promises to the benefit of worldly life happiness (Schmidt 2016, 13).

This crisscross or zigzagging reading consistent to a network of ideas in the field of *atheist intellectual history* makes considerable room for grasping *biographical stories of illustrative figures*. Four chapters of the book introduce four types of heresies - out of many possible others - rebuked by mainstream theological and political orthodoxies. First, one is acquainted with the figure Samuel Putnam, with his hesitating conversions during a lifetime of secular pilgrimage. What is remarkable about Putnam's itinerant freethinking resides in his continuous public reinvention („a customs official, a novelist, a traveling lecturer, an editor, and a historian” - Schmidt 2016, 28), so that his ideological and transformative conversions become the benchmark of his life (Schmidt 2016, 37-43). However, the outstanding merit of his ruminations and swinging moods and orientations is his monumental inventory book *400 Years of Freethought* (1894) counting more than 140 portraits of secularists and freethinkers (Schmidt 2016, 54-55). Second, the figure of Watson Heston symbolizes the more immediate impact of the visual upon the secularist message, beyond its argumentative tribulations: the mocking cartoonist put forward „an incomparable iconography of American secularism... of enlightened rationality, anti-Catholicism, women's emancipation, anti-evangelicalism, scientific progress, intellectual freedom, and strict church-state separation” (Schmidt 2016, 84). Third, the blasphemous former Adventist Charles Reynolds epitomizes the itinerant lecturer offensive „against moral decency, good order, and public peace” (Schmidt 2016, 174). Fourth, Elmina D. Slenker might be considered an emblematic case for what the God-affirming tradition in the United States has repudiated as obscenity. Like Reynolds, she was tried for violating morality and decency. Militating to reform the traditional underpinnings of womanhood and motherhood (Schmidt 2016, 246), Elmina Slenker aimed at shaking both conceptions about sexual behavior and the institution of marriage. Moreover, marital relationship education constituted the goal of the Virginian village woman atheist's domestic novels (Schmidt 2016, 227-229).

Putnam the freethinker, Heston the sarcastic draftsman, Reynolds the blasphemous lecturer, and Slenker the obscene woman character had to confront not only the rigid morale of Christian devotion, but also the political *institutions* designed to defend severe breaches of the un-

questioned norms of morality and order. Anthony Comstock and the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice functioned as the watchdog and the instrument for eradicating the „atheist scare” in the United States after 1873: „Victoria Woodhull, Ezra Heywood, Joseph Treat, John Lant, and Sara B. Chase - Comstock marked them all down together on a spiritualist-infidel-libertine-blasphemer-liberal continuum” (Schmidt 2016, 237), among many other potential bad influences on the status-quo moral and civil order. Moreover, infidels could be further divided considering their specific *reform targets*: the author mentions, for instance, African-American freethinkers (David S. Cincore, Lord A. Nelson, Hubert Harrison) committed to educating and emancipating the black people in the spirit of the new secular rationality (Schmidt 2016, 140-141) and marriage reformers (Ezra and Angela Heywood, Henry M. Parkhurst, Edward B. Foote, or Theodore R. Kinget) addressing the issues of birth, contraception and heredity in keeping with scientific and medical arguments (Schmidt 2016, 216-217, 236, 239). Last but not least, there were the militant and obstinate *journals* defending whatever cases devoted to the turning down of religious obscurantisms and bigotry, among which *Boston Investigator* and *Truth Seeker* fought the fiercest battles.

The „Ingersollian golden age” (Schmidt 2016, 252) of secular militancy and uproar of infidels came to an end at the turn of the twentieth century and its first decade, when most of the figures engaged in the various front battles against religiousness passed away. Their successors resurrected their heroic struggles and further brought fresh new orientations by diversifying the content meaning of secularism. First, in the 1920s and 1930s, both the proliferation of lucrative professional associations and literary imaginings decisively contributed to what might be called „the roaring twenties of secularism, humanism and intellectualism”. On the one hand, literary works of the period delved into romancing the freethinking and nonconformism of the nineteenth century infidels. Van Wyck Brooks, Sinclair Lewis and George Seibel, among others, reverently saluted the freethinkers’ crusade against ignorance and hypocrisy. Brooks went so far as to identify an original type-like figure, the American character of the village atheist (Schmidt 2016, 251-252). On the other, there were brand new publications (one case in point being the foundation of *Humanitarian Review* in 1903) and militant associations, among which the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism (4A - founded 1925) took the upper hand. The 4A’s major ideological confrontations have targeted the creation of satellite units in college campuses and the promotion of the American Anti-Bible Society, while simultaneously launching a four-dimension agenda: asserting the divide between science and religion, unmasking of censorship based on religious grounds, rebutting theodicy and continuing the fight for the strict separation between church and state (Schmidt 2016, 254-263). The 4A manifesto, entitled „The Five Fundamentals of Atheism”, pointed at

„materialism, sense-based empiricism, biological evolution, the inexplicability of evil and suffering, and here-and-now happiness” (Schmidt 2016, 258). Later on, in the 1940s and 1950s, in the context of fighting „godless communism” and institutional barriers imposed through religious tests for public offices, school prayers and Bible readings, free-thinkers and humanists alike pushed their luck in searching for political reparations (Schmidt 2016, 249-250). The countercultural trends of the 1960s, the anti-Vietnam protests and the overall civil rights agitations have brought up the character of „the new atheist” (Schmidt 2016, 280), and, reassured by some salient victories in the Supreme Court, the new atheists would come to claim, in the aftermath of 9/11, that „science flies you to the moon; religion flies you into buildings” (Schmidt 2016, 281).

The author’s remark on the results of the 4A’s overall activity might as well stand for a lucid conclusion of the book itself: „giving atheism a good name remained a lost cause; giving religion a bad name by linking it to regional backwardness, willful ignorance, and unreasoning emotion had half a chance of succeeding” (Schmidt 2016, 259).

### **Reference:**

Schmidt, Leigh Eric. 2016. *Village Atheists: How America’s Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.