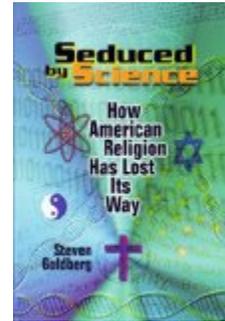


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Steven Goldberg. *Seduced by Science: How American Religion Has Lost Its Way*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1999. ix + 220 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-3104-8.

Reviewed by Steven L. Ware (Department of History, Nyack College Manhattan Center)
Published on H-AmRel (March, 2000)



Seduction and Science

One of the regular publications which comes across my desk is *Progress in Theology: The Newsletter of the John Templeton Foundation*. Another is *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*. While neither of these publications nor the foundations which publish them are specifically mentioned in *Seduced by Science: How American Religion Has Lost Its Way*, author Steven Goldberg nevertheless raises some very important questions about the ways in which these and other faith-based organizations address issues at the intersection of religion and science.

Goldberg's main thesis is that American religious leaders and organizations have made a crucial mistake in discussing matters of public debate at just the time when they have apparently gathered enough political strength to win the right to be heard. Rather than focusing on their historic concerns of human rights, limitations, and goals, they have been "seduced" (a word I would not normally anticipate using in the same sentence as "science") into using the language and presuppositions of science. As a result, the central message of humility, values, and faith is not being heard clearly.

Goldberg nails down this indictment in chapters two, three, and four of his book with three clear examples of how religiously motivated individuals and groups have responded to scientific issues or developments. Chapter two investigates the debate over the patenting of the human genome, with the possibilities of cloning humans. As Goldberg points out, religious statements opposing the patenting have based their opposition on the assertion that "genes define who we are"—a patently materi-

alistic viewpoint—rather than the historic religious belief that humans are much more than the sum of their material parts (pp. 20-21). Chapter three revisits the creation/evolution debate – not to argue for one side or the other, but to critique the way in which the creationists have presented their arguments. Rather than following the lead of early critiques of Darwinian evolution for its apparent lack of human values, modern creationists have attempted to use such things as the geologic record to prove that the earth is only thousands rather than millions of years old. Therefore, while failing to win a place for the Genesis creation account in public school classrooms, Goldberg contends that creationists have strengthened "the troubling notion that American religion must adorn itself in the trappings of science in order to be taken seriously" (p. 33). Chapter four discusses recent studies on the "medical power of prayer," noting that many of these studies have concluded that the majority of patients seem to fare better when prayer is included as one aspect of their treatment. Yet Goldberg asks the disturbing question of what it means for religious practice when prayer comes to be regarded in such utilitarian fashion as just one more means of therapy (pp. 49-50).

The second major section of the book (chapters five through eight) is where Goldberg's expertise as a scholar of the relationship between American law and religion shines forth. Giving a careful and chronological review of judicial decisions bearing on the free exercise of religion over the last two centuries in the United States, he elucidates the primary ways in which religious practices

have been regulated, or not regulated. More importantly, he shows that the public square in the United States has always been open to religious discourse on matters of public importance. Although Goldberg's original focus on religion and science tends to be a bit obscured in these chapters, the material presented herein is truly valuable in its own right. Moreover, the material of these chapters forms the backbone of his contention in the concluding section of the book (chapters nine and ten) that the American public square is still very open to religious input.

It strikes me that all three of the issues used by Goldberg in the early chapters to form his indictment that American religion has been seduced by science – patenting of the human genome, creation/evolution, and the medical power of prayer – are particularly susceptible to the perception of the necessity of the use of scientific language and concepts for participation in debate, while only one of them – the medical power of prayer—is by nature open to specifically religious input. The potential and risks involved in gene patents beg for religious input, but also carry the powerful temptation of manipulation and human re-creation. And the already sordid history of the creation/evolution debate tells us that the scientific community casts a wary eye toward anyone who challenges the veracity of Darwinian evolution, as evidenced by the vociferous complaints in response to Philip E. Johnson's *Darwin on Trial* and *Reason in the Balance*.

It also strikes me that Goldberg gives only scant attention to the underlying reason why many religious people and organizations feel the need to cloak their comments in the language of science. It is because religious people feel that they have been forced into a corner by the wide acceptance of Darwinian science, which at heart is a materialistic philosophy – defining reality as belonging only to the physical or material world. While Goldberg's careful discussion of the historical development of American legal framework by which religion can participate in public debate shows conclusively that American legal doctrine does not overtly oppress religion, he gives little evidence to show that there is not a bias against religion or religious opinions among the scientific community, or among others shaping issues of public debate.

Goldberg's approach to religion-science issues might be categorized as "separate-but-equal," recognizing that each has distinctive contributions to make. He sees the central religious message of "humility, values, and faith" (118ff) as a necessary counterweight to temptations toward uncontrolled materialism. His conclusion echoes

his central concern and challenge from the beginning: "The question is not whether we are free to make spiritual values temper material progress. The question is whether we will choose to do so" (p. 151).

At the same time, one cannot help but wonder how such an approach is viewed by the true Darwinists in the scientific community – those for whom the material world is the only effective reality. From their perspective, Goldberg's fine argumentation is much ado about nothing, as are the efforts of the publications and foundations mentioned at the beginning of this review. And while such individuals are obviously not the audience Goldberg endeavors to reach in this volume, that certainly does not mean that they have no influence in shaping the issues of religion-science debate.

A final concern I have with Goldberg's discussion is where he leaves us at the end of his admittedly fine presentation. In other words, where do we go from here? He argues effectively for the continuing validity of offering religious perspectives in scientific debates, and especially for the right of faith communities to train their children in the values and doctrines of those faiths (chapter nine). Yet I fail to see many practical suggestions on how to express religious concerns, or venues for accomplishing this goal. Goldberg affirms the validity of religious values being taught in the home and in local churches and synagogues, but offers little practical hope for more responsible or practical religious input in public debates.

Nevertheless, this book commends itself to a potentially wide audience. It deserves to be read by professors and students who want to understand the historical application of the First Amendment with regard to the free exercise of religion. (I have plans to use it in the future in a course on contemporary Christian cultural issues.) The central section of the book was most helpful and is perhaps Goldberg's finest contribution, despite the fact that it drifts away from the initial discussions of religion and science. More in line with Goldberg's purpose, however, this book deserves to be read by those who wish to understand some of the modern religion-science issues of debate, and how thoughtful people of faith might respond. Professor Goldberg has clearly affirmed the relevance of religious faith for the issues and developments of the modern world.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amrel>

Citation: Steven L. Ware. Review of Goldberg, Steven, *Seduced by Science: How American Religion Has Lost Its Way*. H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3950>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.