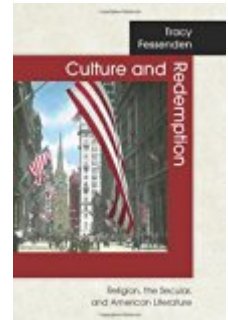


**Tracy Fessenden.** *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. x + 337 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-04963-2.



**Reviewed by** Finbarr Curtis

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For many commentaries on American religion and politics, it is an axiom that the line that demarcates the religious from the secular is blurry. Many of these discussions presume that this normative and analytic blurriness comes with the difficulty of attaining neutrality on religious matters. Tracy Fessenden's *Culture and Redemption* advances a subtle and nuanced set of interpretations of secular tropes in American literature that offers a more complex take on what is at stake in the rhetoric of religious neutrality. In this collection of perceptive and insightful essays on subjects that range from the colonial period to the twentieth century, Fessenden does not propose a new way to clarify the boundaries between religion and the secular. Rather, she considers the institutional and discursive conditions under which it is useful for powerful groups to be able to identify certain beliefs, practices, and forms of identification as religiously neutral. According to Fessenden, the potency of secular rhetoric is that it offers a privileged place from which to affirm public consensus about normative American identity. From this position, "others" may be tolerated, but in such ways as to render their commit-

ments as distinctly religious over and against the neutrality of the mainstream. On this point, Fessenden's work stands within a body of postcolonial scholarship that has taken issue with sociological efforts to measure processes of secularization. From the point of view of postcolonial discursive analysis, the problem with head counts of the religious versus the nonreligious is that line between religiosity and secularity is itself part of the rhetorical game.

Fessenden's attention to power marks an important advance in the effort to undo Protestant exclusivity in the telling of American religious history. As she notes, one irony of attempts to correct for Protestant bias by including the narratives of more religious groups is that the focus on pluralism can reproduce the very tolerance and inclusivity that American Protestantism has claimed as its particular genius. By showing how the rhetoric of secular tolerance actually sediments social and political authority, Fessenden brings to the analysis of religion the critical lens that scholars of gender, race, and class have used to demonstrate that pervasive inequalities are often most invisible to

those in power. As she states, "To unmask the exacting religious, national, racial, and other specifications that have passed themselves off as a blandly accommodating Christianity is also to begin to expose the similarly exacting specifications within an allegedly universal secular" (p. 12).

One of the strengths of Fessenden's book is her ability to offer non-reductive interpretations of how secular rhetoric has shaped and been shaped by categories of race, sex, class, and nation. For example, the first two chapters assess the construction of American national identity in light the violent displacement of Native Americans. What interests Fessenden is the Puritan capacity to cast Native Americans as both threatening and irrelevant. The self-evidence of the equation of Puritanism and civilization did not justify violence so much as it made any justification unnecessary. Within a teleological narrative that legitimated Protestant suspicions of decadent religious institutions, middle-class attitudes toward property and work, Anglo-Saxon notions of racial superiority, and child-rearing practices that emphasized discipline and literacy, Puritans wove their religious and cultural ambitions into an American national imaginary.

In later chapters, Fessenden shows how anti-Catholic tropes have shaped American understandings of liberty. This has been especially evident in the way anti-Catholic denunciations of ecclesiastical tyranny have often served as rhetorical models for sexual, racial, and intellectual freedom. On this point, her analysis differs from other genealogies of secularism in that she does not posit an intrinsic secularity to Protestant voluntarism. Rather, Fessenden calls attention to the contested nature of the rhetorical claim that Protestant religiosity provides a neutral standpoint from which to model American liberties. This suggests that Catholic attempts to articulate an American identity were more complex than a simple capitulation to Protestant expectations of religious privacy. According to Fessenden,

Catholics were grappling with how to imagine a distinctly Catholic secularity. But as she demonstrates in her chapter on F. Scott Fitzgerald, asserting an alternative secular Catholic identity could be fraught with anxiety and self-contradiction.

One theme of the book is the way in which contemporary academic sensibilities are often less troubled by exclusions based on religion than those based on race, ethnicity, or gender. What Fessenden demonstrates is that it is not always so easy to keep these discourses separate. In provocative analyses of heroic figures of the American left such as Thomas Nast, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, she shows how celebrations of liberation from old world tyranny often packed their rhetorical punches by aligning racial, sexual, and religious tropes in a way that contemporary secular liberals would find embarrassing. This problem informs Fessenden's final chapter, in which she points to the problem of imagining dissent in exclusively secular terms, as if religion is a hegemonic monolith that needs to be resisted in order to imagine progress. If secularity has itself been implicated in the power to define insiders and outsiders, then an exclusively secular discourse may actually reproduce the anti-democratic elitism leftist academics seek to overturn.

In her conclusion, Fessenden suggests that the logic of secularity informs a post-9/11 American foreign policy in which underdevelopment is defined in terms of deprivatized religion. While I find her arguments generally persuasive, it is possible that her impressive facility with interpretive synthesis might begin to pose its own set of problems. Simply put, her interpretation of the secular runs a whole bunch of stuff together. What is the status of the old-fashioned sense of secularism as unbelief? Is there a meaningful difference between an atheist and a conservative Protestant like George W. Bush? This is particularly pressing if secularity is presented as the discursive logic legitimating contemporary American crusades to

democratize the world. I think it is an open question whether an excess of secularity or liberalism is really the best way to describe the sources of the Patriot Act or Guantanamo Bay. After all, to the extent to which *Culture and Redemption* criticizes current American foreign policy, it does so as an excellent book by a secular liberal for secular liberals.

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