

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought*. By David Biale. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. 248. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN: 9780691168043.

How secular is secularism? And to what extent do particular expressions of secularism reflect the religious cultures and contexts in which, and against which, they are conceived?

As a broad overview of Jewish secular literature written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, David Biale's *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought*, which was recently released in paperback, depicts Jewish secularism as both a transformation of the Jewish tradition and a continuation of it. Biale adds to a chorus of scholars who have challenged the notion that tradition and modernity are opposed to each other. However, this book is unique in that whereas many other works examine the conscious appropriation of tradition by modern denominational expressions, Biale provides an account of this dialectic in a realm that is commonly considered to have broken the chain of tradition for the sake of modernity. His thesis also provides an explanation for the contemporary resurgence of religious expression. Rather than breaking from religion, he says, secularism and religion remain constantly in dialectical tension, for the two have roots in the same tradition.

In examining how various Jewish secularists revolted against the premodern Jewish tradition while at the same time appropriating its canon to create distinctly Jewish ideologies, Biale shows how tradition, albeit transformed, served as a catalyst for secularization. The secularist strategy of reading and reinterpreting previous works to ensure recognizability of new ideas, even when those new ideas directly contradicted the ones from which they were developed, shows that change succeeded when its introduction originated in an internal discourse, even if the ideas themselves were borrowed from a broader social context. As Biale notes, the key to understanding this dialectic is intertextuality.

Biale challenges two pillars of the secularization thesis, which broadly holds that as societies progress, religion loses its influence while reason and science gain authority. First, by showing how modern secular writers engaged tradition to create their own ideologies, he challenges the notion that modern secular thought represents a complete break from premodern religion. Second, by showing how these thinkers are distinctly Jewish in their secularist expressions, he demonstrates the heterogeneous and context-specific character of secularization. Christian secularization will therefore travel different paths and have different modes of expression than Jewish secularization, even if they are both responses to modernity.

For Biale, "secularism" includes metaphysical positions rejecting the supernatural in favor of materialism, on the one hand, and political doctrines requiring separation of religion and governance, on the other hand. He shows how these two components relate to each other in the minds of secular thinkers. Biale also notes how historical and cultural interpretations of the Bible in Jewish secular thought replace the jurisprudential and theological approaches of the rabbis. As such, one could understand materialism and freedom from religion as the dogmas of secularism, and historiography and cultural approaches as exegetical tools that transformed the canon to support a secularist agenda.

Biale organizes his book around three central concepts: God, Torah, and Israel. He begins each chapter with a brief description of how premodern understandings of one of these concepts could

serve a secularist foundation. He then shows how various secular ideologies adapted the pillar to respond to a modernist challenge.

In the first chapter, Biale examines key trends in the secular transformation of theology. For Biale, secularism is not quite atheism. Secularists still maintained a notion of God, yet the concept of the divine was transformed to fit the needs of the day. No longer was God depicted as wrapped in a tallit (prayer shawl) with the knot of his tefillin (phylactery) behind his head; in the secular age, God was now portrayed through nature and science. While Biale associates the following to Spinoza and Salomon Maimon, this strategy applies to Jewish secularists more generally, “[T]hey freed philosophy from biblical theology, since, while retaining the language of the divine, they emptied it of its theistic meanings and turned it into a product of the human mind” (34). In this chapter, we are shown how Maimonides’ negative theology takes a secular turn via Spinoza’s pantheism, and becomes equated with the natural world and its laws. We also see how thinkers take up the kabbalist tradition and transform the idea that God’s “nothingness” fills the world to a view of the world devoid of the divine. The third trend found Jewish roots in the pagan religions of ancient Israel and created a culture of dissent in their secular revival. For each trend, Biale shows how secularist thinkers took an active role in becoming the “authors” of older texts through a process of reinterpretation.

In the second chapter, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, again through Spinoza, becomes the forerunner for the secularization of the Bible and biblical interpretation. (For Biale, Baruch/Benedict Spinoza is the bridge between the premodern tradition and its modern secular counterpart. He calls him the last medieval and the first modern philosopher, and the fulcrum for the change, due to his role in transforming medieval categories into modern concepts.) In adapting ibn Ezra’s exegetical approach and relying on the Talmudic dictum that “the Bible speaks in the language of man,” modern secularists abandoned the idea that the Bible was a work of theology or philosophy. Instead, it became seen as a literary tour de force that spoke to the cultural and historical ethos of the Jewish people. As part of a mundane literary canon, its value lay in sociological and historiographical examination of its content, and its relevance in its political and moral critique of society.

In chapters three and four, Biale shows how conceptions of Israel developed either to respond to nationalist sentiments or as a way to maintain Jewish culture and history in an environment of social and political flux. Spinoza again takes front stage in these chapters as an intellectual precursor, but he is now accompanied by Moses Mendelssohn, whose religious philosophy allowed for the separation of religion from politics. Secular visions of Israel as a race, a nation, or as citizens of a state borrowed deeply from European political and social theories as well as the rhetoric of the day. Yet, in each case, arguments were cast in a Jewish mold for their adoption and implementation.

Biale’s breadth of knowledge provides a strong background both for his history of Jewish secularism and description of the Jewishness of secularization. At times, however, the sheer number of voices he incorporates limits his ability to go into great depth to show how particular writers engaged the Jewish tradition. Rather, he gives specific examples of global trends that he observes in the process of Jewish secularization. His book thus provides a compelling introduction to Jewish secularism and a persuasive counter to the dominant conceptions of secularism and secularization. Yet the study also begs for deeper engagement with works of the various thinkers who are mentioned.

Also, because the focus of his book is on Jewish secularism and not secular ideologies created by people who happen to be Jewish, Biale purposefully excludes those “non-Jewish Jews” (a phrase he borrows from Isaac Deutscher) who do not consciously engage Jewish tradition. Their exclusion allows Biale to emphasize his claims without having to account for those examples that might challenge them.

In closing, Biale warns his readers that, while his book focuses on the rise of Jewish secularism, postmodernity has not uniformly followed the secularist trend. Religion and religious identity have experienced a resurgence, yet in a way that has incorporated many of the previous century's secularist objections. This development only strengthens Biale's challenge to the dominant thesis of secularization. As the pendulum swings back from secularism towards religion, we see the dialectic: the two poles are constantly renegotiated in social and political discourse. Biale provides a personal example of this intriguing return to secularized forms of religiosity. He recounts how his father in his younger years saw the violation of Yom Kippur as a way to proclaim his secular identity, yet in his later years would go to synagogue for Kol Nidre (prayers) on the evening of Yom Kippur (even if he would have some tea and cake after coming home from synagogue). In this final personal account, Biale underlines the idea that while secular and religious sentiment may be responses to temporaneous events, their expressions and philosophies look to each other and to the tradition that they share. Secularization and religious revival are thus tied to one another, both in their revolt against each other and in the creation of their respective ideologies.

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