

The Scientific Spirit of American Humanism, by Stephen P. Weldon. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020, 308 pp; price???

A quite large literature on the sociological relationship between American religion and science has emerged in the past few decades. After showing that conflict over fact claims is largely limited to conservative Protestants and human origins, sociologists have begun to focus on moral conflict. Historian Stephen F. Weldon's excellent analysis contributes to our deeper understanding of moral conflict between religion and science as well as the history of non-religion in America.

The book is a history of the integration of science into organized American humanism from the late 19th century to the 1990s. The book focuses on two types of humanists. The early group were Christian humanists at the very liberal end of the Protestant spectrum – primarily Unitarians. While religious humanists thought science was a noble endeavor that satisfied human desire for explanation, this was part of a more holistic image of the human, with meaning being derived from much more than science. The split between modernist and fundamentalist Protestantism in the same era over enlightenment rationality and science has been well told. Another contribution of the book is that it extends that well known history to groups further down the enlightenment continuum to those who eventually gave up transcendence altogether, while remaining religious in a more Bergerian sense.

Movements often contain the seeds of their own destruction, and religious humanism in the second era was taken over by scientists and secularized. This humanism told a story of a triumphant positivist science that could overcome the limits of the human experience and rationalize the world, while employing a fundamentally reductionistic form of explanation that was anathema to the previous generation of religious humanists.

In the U.S., the strongest moral opposition to science comes when scientists appear to create a religion of science – an entirely distinct and secular meaning system that looks to science to not only understand the world but to give society meaning and moral goals. Weldon's book is the first scholarly account I have seen of the actual church of the scientists. After largely displacing the religious humanists, the intellectual and organizational framework of humanism was not only the moral system of the scientists, but the social apparatus for spreading their message. Scientists associated with organized humanism, like Carl Sagan in his influential Cosmos TV series, portrayed science as the primary moral force in history, and a solution to all our challenges.

Another contribution of Weldon's history is that it shows why contemporary religious people would think that scientists were engaged in a competing moral project. The group celebrated the moral projects of elite scientists such as reform eugenics and the psychological behaviorist control of society. At times they verged on advocating outright technocracy where scientists should just make decisions without democracy.

Conservative Protestant attacks on “secular humanism” from the 1980s forward highlighted the moral message of humanism and how much this was portrayed to

be the result of science. The humanists responded in kind by attacking the religious conservatives, amplifying this conflict that was less about competing fact claims about the natural world as it was about whether religion or science should be leading society. With attempts to legally define humanism as a religion, it is easy to see how religious conservatives would see this group as promoting a competing meaning system.

Beyond scholars interested in the relationship between religion and science, this book will also be of interest to those interested in non-religion. To the extent there has historically been an organizational form for non-religion, the post WWII humanist organizations have been it. Contemporary studies of non-religion also show that science is the God of the non-religious, and Weldon's book shows how that connection was made, and the nuances in that position among elites. Weldon also shows the road not taken, which is the still secular yet more holistic earlier vision of humanism that was more romantic, and not such an advocate of scientism.

I hope it is not churlish to say that sociologists may wish that the book had focused more on explanation instead of just description. Most notably, it is not very clear why the scientists were able to displace the religious humanists in the 1950s and 1960s. However, one can imagine that the data simply did not exist for a detailed explanation.

Overall, this book is very important for those interested in the intellectual evolution of the relationship between religion and science in America, as well as for those interested in the non-religious as a group. It should be on your bookshelf to the left of books that document the history of the role of science in the split between what are now called mainline and conservative Protestantism.

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