

## CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS OF SCIENTISM

Robert C. Koons

*The Disunity of American Culture: Science, Religion, Technology, and the Secular State*  
by John C. Caiazza (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013)

There is much to recommend in *The Disunity of American Culture*. John Caiazza's book is a clear and admirably competent survey of the conflict between religion and scientism in the Western world in recent decades and of the cultural consequences of that conflict. The book's greatest strength lies in Caiazza's ability to convey to a wide readership, with clarity and accuracy, the rise and fall of scientific positivism within the highly specialized world of academic philosophy. Nevertheless, the book's subject matter is so wide-ranging and diverse that the author has difficulty fitting it within a fully coherent argument, and I should be hard-pressed to identify its overall thesis.

The book comprises five parts: I, on American religion; II, on the history and philosophy of science; III, on three attempts at unified scientific reductionism; IV, on cultural decline; and V, on the irresolvable conflict between religion and science.

Caiazza opens his book with three chap-

ters devoted to American religion (Part I), and three to recent developments in the philosophy of science (Part II). The chapters on religion are a bit of a hodgepodge. He begins by describing the variety of religions that originated in America, from the Southern Baptist Church to Scientology. He then turns to the well-known pattern of American colleges and universities abandoning their religious and confessional roots, a story documented by the work of George Marsden. Somewhat oddly, Caiazza chooses Tufts University as his example, a university that has distanced itself from its Unitarian origins. From Unitarianism to modern secularism is not a great distance to fall, in my opinion. Marsden's examples of staunchly Calvinist or enthusiastically Evangelical colleges that have undergone such transformations provide more interesting and poignant cases. In the part's third chapter, Caiazza gives brief and useful reviews of books on American religion by Alan Wolfe (a secular liberal) and John Richard Neuhaus (a neo-conservative Catholic).

Part II, on the philosophy of science, is one of the most useful sections of the book. Caiazza begins by criticizing the "Whig" theory

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of the history of science, which depicts the progress of science as synonymous with the early modern pioneers' breaking the stranglehold of Christian dogma on human thought. Historians of science now know (as even Stephen Jay Gould admitted) that modern science had its origins in the Middle Ages, with Platonic, Aristotelian, and specifically Christian ideas providing fuel and not a damper for effective speculation about nature. Caiazza effectively refutes Gould's two-track theory (two "non-overlapping magisteria"), in which religion is allowed to survive free of molestation at the cost of conceding the entire domain of "fact" to the authority of science. Caiazza points out that Gould's idea is nothing more than the resurrection of Siger of Brabant's theory of "double truth." Both ideas threaten to bifurcate human thought into irreconcilable fragments.

Finally, in the crucial chapter 7, "The Counterrevolution in the Philosophy of Science," Caiazza informs the reader about the fascinating trajectory of the philosophy of science in the English-speaking world in the course of the twentieth century. Philosophy of science began with the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle in the early 1900s, which led to the "Unity of Science" movement, in which all human knowledge was to be regimented according to a single, rigorous method, with mathematical physics at its base. Led by Thomas Kuhn, historians of science demonstrated that the unity of scientific method was an unsustainable myth. This turn to historicism has influenced American philosophy beyond the philosophy of science, with Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of rationalistic ethics, *After Virtue*, as a prime example.

The heart of the book lies in Part III, in which Caiazza examines the ideas and arguments of three champions of scientism (or reductive materialism), one in each of three

crucial fields: physics (Stephen Weinberg), biology (E. O. Wilson), and social science (Stanley Milgram). The examples are well chosen, since each exemplar combines preeminence in his field with considerable philosophical sophistication. Caiazza deftly exposes the unfulfilled promises and unexamined assumptions of each of the three reductionist programs.

In the case of Weinberg's attempt to reduce all human knowledge to particle physics, Caiazza points out that the weird and mysterious character of modern quantum mechanics (in contrast to the simple and deterministic world of classical mechanics) undermines Weinberg's project. Caiazza carefully introduces the reader to this fascinating new quantum world, with its indeterminacy and unbounded entanglements, a world that is likely to remain forever beyond the reach of the would-be reductionist. Caiazza might also have pointed to the internal inconsistencies within Weinberg's philosophy of science, which combines a naive reductionist materialism with a strangely Neoplatonic theory of scientific insight. Weinberg admits (in *Dreams of a Final Theory*) that we are able to discern true theories by virtue of their inherent beauty, an idea that sits awkwardly with his "atoms and the void" ideology.

Caiazza then turns to the second great reductionist project of modern times, the dream of a kind of cosmic Darwinism that would explain all the world's phenomena, including human thought and intuition, by means of natural selection, with its combination of brute, mindless processes and the tautologous logic of the survival of the fittest. E. O. Wilson, the evolutionary entomologist and founder of sociobiology (now known more often as "evolutionary psychology"), serves as the appropriate *bête noire* for this chapter. Caiazza highlights the fundamental incoherency of the Darwinist project, since

it is impossible to identify precisely the “unit of selection”: is it the gene, the phenotype of the individual organism, or the whole species? The attempts by Wilson, Dennett, and others to “explain” such phenomena as morality or religion are nothing more than fantastic “Just So” stories, without empirical foundation or theoretical discipline.

The fuzziness of the theory becomes even more problematic when Wilson and Dawkins try to extend the Darwinian metaphor into so-called cultural evolution, with supposed selection of “memes,” indefinable units of cultural transmission. I wish that at this point Caiazza had closed his case by pointing out (as Alvin Plantinga has recently done, following the trail blazed by G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis) that Wilson’s Darwinian reductionism is self-defeating, since theorizing about evolution would be just one more piece of material phenomena to be reduced to the instrumentality of mere survival. According to Darwinists, the Darwinian “meme” has been selected for its propensity for self-replication, a selection that is by definition indifferent to truth or rationality.

In chapter 10 (the third chapter of Part III), Caiazza uses Stanley Milgram’s famous experiments about the power of authority as a paradigm of modern social science. He captures well the irony of Milgram’s project, which exploited the unique authority of science at midcentury to try to demonstrate that authority itself is the root of all evils. Like all postmodernists, Milgram saw “authority” as something exercised by other people, never by academics, scholars, or scientists like himself. It is precisely this blind spot that has unleashed so much social dislocation in the latter half of the twentieth century, as the reductionists of modern social science have destroyed the necessary structures of liberty in the name of liberation.

As Caiazza persuasively argues, empirical

social science’s failures lie primarily at the theoretical level, since it lacks the resources for navigating the potentially infinite variety of human relationships. Since all human action contains, at least potentially, an element of reason, no merely mechanical model can ever be adequate. Again, if the operations could be reduced to a mechanism, the result would be to undermine rationality itself. Moreover, Gödel’s incompleteness results demonstrate the irreducibility of rational thought to any computable algorithm.

Part IV consists of a somewhat miscellaneous collection of three chapters. Caiazza notes the precipitous decline in the prestige of science within literary and popular culture in the twentieth century in chapter 11, citing both dystopian science fiction and philosophical deconstructionism. In chapter 12, Caiazza presents a disjointed triptych of three important contemporary figures: Elaine Pagels, the scholar of Gnosticism; Richard Dawkins, the apostle of atheism; and Pope Benedict, with a focus on his important Regensburg address on the interdependency of Christianity and philosophical reason. Caiazza provides a plausible explanation of the appeal of ancient Gnosticism to many Americans, fitting as it does with a somewhat narcissistic turn to the self and with an increasingly casual attitude to the demands of morality. Caiazza brings to light the philosophical vacuity of Dawkins’s arguments (or, more precisely, the lack thereof) in his *The God Delusion*.

Finally, Caiazza provides a useful summary of Benedict’s most important lecture, one that was widely misunderstood and that provoked an international spasm of violent protests on the part of some Muslims (ironically providing evidence for one of Benedict’s claims, namely, the unique bond between Christian spirituality and philosophical discussion). Benedict argues

that the Christian conception of God is of one who is supremely rational, with human rationality a manifestation of our sharing in the divine “image.”

Western civilization has been the product of a unique rapprochement between faith and reason, one that faces twin challenges: from those within Christianity who (beginning with the Reformation) sought the “de-Hellenization” of the faith, and those within the secular world who sought to “liberate” philosophy and science from the tutelage (and protection) of Christian dogma. As Benedict points out, science is itself a synthesis of empiricism with a Platonic and Aristotelian element of theoretical insight, a synthesis that is also under attack by those who would reduce science to a simple, mechanical algorithm. This reduction is a particular danger to our understanding of uniquely human phenomena, including religion.

Caiazza describes the rise and fall of the American pragmatist school of philosophy in chapter 13. Many readers will be pleased to learn about the work of C. S. Peirce, the true genius behind the pragmatist movement. Peirce was a pioneer in the study of mathematical logic and scientific thought who eschewed the simplistic reductionism, skepticism, and relativism that would become characteristic of later pragmatic thinkers. Peirce was a realist who drew heavily from the work of the Scholastic philosopher John Duns Scotus. The subsequent history of pragmatism is one of tragic decline, from the stylish radical empiricism of William James to the turgid nihilism of John Dewey and Richard Rorty.

In Part V, Caiazza examines the political and cultural implications of the issues that he has examined in the book’s earlier parts. In chapter 14, he describes the “magical quality” of technology in modern society. Modern people tend to worship science as

an occult force, much as the Pacific Islanders created “cargo cults” in response to the arrival of the products of modern industry. Caiazza examines the troubling ethical implications of such worship, with the controversy over the use of embryonic stem cells as his example.

In chapter 15, Caiazza notes the demographical disaster that threatens the West with a catastrophic collapse, owing to the technological separation of sexuality from reproduction. He argues in chapter 16 that the survival of Western monotheism is crucial if we are to avoid a displacement of religious zeal into the political realm (as typified by Nazism and Communism). Traditional religion protects human dignity by supporting an ethics of “bright lines”—of absolute prohibitions. In the final chapter, Caiazza argues that the “new secular state” is doomed to failure since it cannot find adequate intellectual foundations either in religion or in science itself. The new state increasingly relies on the false consciousness of “tolerance,” which is really a mask for a new and ever more insidious intolerance.

I find fault with the book in two respects. First, Caiazza tries to cover so much ground that the book lacks a sharp focus. Second, the book is heavy on the critique of reductive scientism but much lighter on the development of positive alternatives. You cannot defeat something with nothing. The only discussion of a positive alternative comes in the relatively short section in which Caiazza discusses Pope Benedict’s thoughtful Regensburg address. The section is fine, but I would have liked to have seen more. For example, Caiazza might have discussed the renaissance of Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy that has unexpectedly burgeoned in academic philosophy in recent decades. I would recommend an investigation into the distinct but related expansion of Christian theism in American

philosophy of departments. Further discussion of contemporary alternatives to Darwinism and materialist theories of mind would also be most welcome.

Despite these faults, *The Disunity of Ameri-*

*can Culture* makes an important contribution. I recommend the book to anyone seeking to understand the intellectual roots of the deep cultural and political divisions in America today.

## LOUISIANA COSMOPOESIS

Aaron Urbanczyk

*The Fiddler of Driskill Hill* by David Middleton  
(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013)

The great poets are something of a mystery. Whether they be Americans or citizens of some other nation, the best of poets create a profound paradox through their art. On the one hand, the poet always sings of the particular, the concrete, the local—*this* place, *this* time, *these* people. On the other hand, the successful poet transcends such concrete particulars and speaks directly to the human heart, seeming to bypass altogether his time and place in history. Such has always been the mystery of art and the secret of great poets. Perhaps Ben Jonson articulated this paradox best in famously praising Shakespeare as “Soul of the age,” and then within the same poem proclaiming that the Bard was “not of an age, but for all time!” David Middleton’s beautiful volume of poems *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill* stands in this great and paradoxical poetic tradition. It is a vivid, rich, and powerful portrait of its region that also aligns itself with the timeless and biblical understanding of humanity, creation, and the story of redemption.

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This volume of verse also stands within two powerful currents in American poetry, one cosmic and broad, the other regional and particular. In the tradition of Walt Whitman, there is something of an epic scope to this slim volume. Middleton’s poems ever seek that which lies beyond the regional; they are always reaching toward the transcendent, the ultimate, the divine. Like Whitman, one gets the distinct impression Middleton is creating the contours not only of his region but of the cosmos in which this region and its poet reside.

Edgar Lee Masters and Robert Frost represent a different poetic tradition with which Middleton’s verse also has deep affinity. Frost, in the entire body of his work, sought to create a cosmos, but on a local level and with a distinctive New England character. Masters too sought to create a world on a small scale, and did so most famously in his brilliant *Spoon River Anthology*. *Spoon River* is the posthumous exploration of the fictive lives of the denizens of a small Midwestern town, emphasizing the complexities of their small-town existence. *The Fiddler of Driskill Hill* is a masterful and beautiful tapestry of