

politics. As for the rehabilitation of these theologians and their role in Vatican II, Shortall finds it unsurprising that “significant fissures began to emerge among the partisans of the *nouvelle théologie* at the council. . . in many ways the logical extension of the divisions that had emerged between the Dominican and Jesuit *nouveaux théologiens* after the war” (240). The author’s keen analysis and judicious tone are evident when she argues that “de Lubac’s critique of the ‘progressive’ interpretation of Vatican II looks less like a conservative backlash than the product of a much earlier turn from incarnation to eschatology, which emerged from the crucible of wartime occupation” (245).

This first-rate work of historical theology serves as an excellent introduction to key currents in French Catholic thought in the last century. The full title of this monograph also might lead the reader to expect a continual intertwining of theological and political history throughout its pages. In *Soldiers of God in a Secular World*, the attention to “twentieth-century French politics” is somewhat more episodic. The episodes Shortall narrates at length can be quite rewarding, particularly the early twentieth-century drama of laicization and the exile of religious congregations, as well as *les années noires* of the Occupation. Other crucial periods, for example the politically polarized Thirties, could have received more, deeper attention. That said, this is a finely crafted book that both contextualizes the *nouvelle théologie* and stakes a claim for its larger historical relevance. Shortall makes an essential and lasting contribution to our understanding of how in the middle of a tortured century Catholicism and modernity managed to arrive at, if not a perfect mutual understanding, at least a promising working relationship.

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***Sincerely Held: American Secularism and Its Believers.* By Charles McCrary. New Studies in Religion. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 296 pp. \$95.00 cloth; \$30.00 paper.**

Over the past couple decades, there has been much theorizing about secularism by academics in literature and religious studies departments, a fair amount of it more intent on jousting with other theorists than illuminating history. Charles McCrary’s *Sincerely Held* enters the lists: it begins by galloping into the bog of Herman Melville’s *The Confidence-Man* (1857) and concludes by being (nearly?) unhorsed by the quest for a coherent “postsecular” position. Throughout, however, McCrary manages to offer both theoretical sophistication and keen insights into the historical permutations of American “religious freedom.”

McCrary opens with a Supreme Court case decided in 1944—*United States v. Ballard*—that expanded the concept of religious freedom. The decision took the veracity of belief off the table and focused on whether the belief was “sincerely held” or not. This sincerity test took root in U.S. religion law and in the culture more broadly. The sincere religious believer emerges as “a protected class whose rights are to be secured and defended” (3), an emergence resting on a tangle of incoherent attempts to determine “sincerity,” define “religious,” and designate the appropriate way that

beliefs ought to be “held.” The book presents a fascinating account of the legal history of the sincerity test in American religious freedom jurisprudence. This narrative unfolds against a backdrop of concerns about insincerity—frauds and con men. McCrary’s trenchant analysis elucidates the story of modern American “secularism,” which he defines here as political projects that produce, regulate, and enforce the boundaries between religion and nonreligion.

After a chapter on “Knaves, Fools, and Sincere Believers,” which begins with Donald Trump and features Melville’s *The Confidence-Man*, McCrary discusses “Secular Governance” by examining Postal Inspector and professional vice suppressor Anthony Comstock’s efforts to ferret out frauds and police sincerity in the late nineteenth century. The book then turns to its central chapters on “sincerely held religious belief” in twentieth-century law. Prosecution of fortune tellers relied on old vagrancy acts, but after *Reynolds v. United States* (1879) clarified that free exercise clauses permitted authorities to prohibit actions done in the name of religion but not rule on the beliefs themselves, courts were less able to assume that fortune telling was a matter of knaves duping fools. In the book’s fourth chapter, on conscientious objectors from World War II through the Viet Nam era, McCrary shows how not just courts, but local draft boards and individual dissenters as well, were ensnared in bureaucratic procedures that exempted from military service only petitioners who could perform certain kinds of sincere belief—who objected “religiously,” a style that after *United States v. Seeger* (1965) did not require mention of a recognizable religious institution, doctrine, or god. Unlike the mostly white successful objectors, however, Frank Africa, a black member of the Philadelphia MOVE organization in the 1980s appealing to a similar logic, was denied religious accommodations in prison. Africa’s case, a focus of Chapter 7, exemplifies how the “hazy category ‘religious’ is defined against the even hazier not-religious, which goes by such names ‘political,’ ‘philosophical,’ ‘secular,’ and ‘terrorist’” (223); it also shows how the determination of religious/not religious was often tilted in one direction or the other by race.

McCrary’s point is not that “religious freedom” needs to be extended more broadly and fairly. It is that “religious freedom, as a liberal institution, serves to grant freedoms selectively, protecting certain dissenters, while upholding normative subjectivities. From this critical perspective, ‘religious’ has no proper or true referent, and thus religious freedom is the stuff of power and politics, and its affordances will always be partial not because ‘all religions’ have yet to be recognized but because the process of recognizing people on the basis of their religiosity is always a technique of governance under racial liberalism” (249).

The final chapter explores the new politics of religious freedom in the culture wars of the twenty-first century—an era when a conservative Christian legal movement weaponized federal and state Religious Freedom Restoration acts to defend religion against what was portrayed as secular persecution. Based on their “sincerely held religious beliefs,” individuals and even corporations demand exemptions from recognizing LGBTQ rights or following COVID-19 protocols. Here as elsewhere in the book, McCrary deftly connects courtroom arguments to conversations about religion in other domains. He notes, for example, how many of these champions of religious liberty echo, at least for tactical purposes, the assumptions of previous decades of religious studies scholarship: religion is pervasive but so diverse as to defy generalizations about its content, but with “the capacity within each person to be religious, then individual sincere belief becomes the defining criterion of religion—it becomes religion itself” (240).

McCrary writes that his “best hope” for the book is that it serves “as a starting point for useful, enriching, and fun conversations” (277). Seeing “religious freedom” in the

closing pages less as a shield for persecuted minorities than as a sword wielded by white Christian nationalists, I am not sure how “fun” readers will find *Sincerely Held*, but the book will certainly be useful and enriching for any serious student of the politics of religion in the modern United States.

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***Before the Religious Right: Liberal Protestants, Human Rights, and the Polarization of the United States.* By Gene Zubovich. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. viii + 391 pp. \$45.00 cloth.**

Ecumenical Protestant clergy played a leading role in creating the mid-twentieth-century American liberal order of racial integration, respect for human rights, and an internationalist foreign policy to promote democracy under the auspices of the United Nations. Rights-based liberalism is therefore to a significant degree the creation of an ecumenical Christian Left that has now been largely eclipsed by an evangelical Christian Right.

Gene Zubovich’s *Before the Religious Right* is a study of how American ecumenical Protestant clergy came to embrace a liberal political vision and how they transformed American politics when they did so. It is also a study of how they failed to persuade members of their own churches to become converts to this cause and why the disconnect between clergy and laity ultimately led to the collapse of the ecumenical religious Left and the rise of a more conservative religious politics.

Though many historians have described twentieth-century American liberalism in secular terms as the creation of politicians, academics, journalists, economists, grassroots activists, or public intellectuals (with the role of church leaders barely mentioned), Zubovich demonstrates that ecumenical Protestant clergy often preceded liberal political leaders in their embrace of progressive causes, and he argues that their moral leadership pushed their political allies to the left and helped shape liberal policies. In 1932, the Federal Council of Churches issued the “Revised Social Ideals of the Churches,” which called for unemployment insurance, federally subsidized retirement pensions, legal recognition of the right of workers to engage in collective bargaining, and other measures that President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration did not adopt until three years later. Similarly, ecumenical Protestants began drawing up plans for a new international world order in 1940, five years before the United Nations was created, and they declared racial desegregation a moral imperative in 1946, shortly before President Harry Truman publicly embraced the cause. Zubovich demonstrates that in each case, the close relationship between ecumenical Protestant church leaders and the ecumenical Protestant church members who served in the federal government facilitated ecumenical Protestant clerical influence on both national policy and American liberal ideology.

Zubovich’s account of how ecumenical Protestants pushed the national political agenda to the left on economics, foreign policy, and civil rights is insightful, but his analysis of why ecumenical Protestants came to embrace these causes is perhaps even more pathbreaking.