Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2016), 360 pp.

When Samuel Porter Putnam sat down at the end of the nineteenth century to write his history of atheism, he faced some tough editorial choices. Who to include under the banner of "freethought"? Not B.F. and Sara Underwood. Though the couple had actively advocated for unbelief from California to New Zealand, they had also dabbled in spiritualism. They weren't good representatives of the cause. Nor was James L. York. The freethought lecturer was famed for his ability to ridicule religious belief, but too buffoonish, Putnam thought. Neither was George Chainey. Though long considered the movement's golden boy, Chainey had had an ecstatic encounter with an angel named Lily Dove and then renounced and denounced all materialist philosophies. No, for Putnam, the history of atheism needed to be a march of progress, from victory unto victory, and he didn't have time for those who veered off course. He left these people out of his massive *400 Years of Freethought*, published in 1894. He "tidied up the messy contingencies of unbelief," writes Leigh Eric Schmidt, an eminent religious historian at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. "Putnam took the zigzagging perplexity out of liberal secularism and mapped it as a triumphal march forward" (59).

The greatest accomplishment of Schmidt's new book, *The Village Atheist: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation*, is that it puts the zigzagging perplexity back into the story. Schmidt has an eye for the historical contexts of unbelief and directs the reader to the complexities of the construction of the atheist identity in American culture during the heyday of the freethought movement at the end of the nineteenth century.

Schmidt tells the stories of four unbelievers. He starts with Putnam, a son of Puritan New England who imagined atheist stories, including his own, as *Pilgrim's Progress* in reverse. *Village Atheists* continues with Watson Heston, a cartoonist who raised questions of the importance of decorum in atheists' debates with their religious neighbors; Charles B. Reynolds, an atheist lecturer who was tried for blasphemy in 1887; and Elmina Drake Slenker, who was prosecuted for obscenity the same year. Each represents an aspect of how the atheist movement positioned itself in the public discourse. Atheists had their differences, but were all "aggrieved contrarians," according to Schmidt, "stunned at the moral shabbiness of scriptural stories or the manipulative theatrics of popular revivalists" (18). They crafted their non-religious identities out of dissent. They constructed a movement in the likeness of their antipathy for American moral norms.

Their unbelief, critically, was not just a matter of metaphysics. It wasn't just personal decisions not to affirm the existence of God and gods. As Schmidt explains, "village atheists, by self-profession, minded this world, not things spiritual, and their stories are told here with the mundane materiality very much in view" (18). It would have been a disservice to this history to pay attention only to atheists' ideas. Schmidt expertly puts these four atheists' lives in the contexts of their time. The results are admirable, offering significant insight into the cultural and social reality of not believing in America.

Village Atheists is a major contribution to the small field of atheist studies. Early scholarly work in the history of American atheism, such as Martin Marty's *The Infidel* (World, 1961) James Turner's *Without God, Without Creed* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), tended to focus on the fractures in Christian thought that opened up space for nonbelievers and Christian leaders' responses to real and imagined atheists. There has been an increasing interest in the history of atheists themselves since the "New Atheists" rose to prominence following the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, and since demographers reported on the sharp increase religious disaffiliation (the so-called "nones") following the end of the Cold War. Some popular works, such as Susan Jacoby's *Freethinkers* (Metropolitan Books, 2004), have started charting the history of American atheism, but not with the academic rigor that Schmidt brings to the task. Schmidt's work may well define the field for future scholars. At the very least, *Village Atheist* is a promising start to a full historiography of the men and women who dissented from belief in the nation that has so adamantly insisted that it is "under God."

Schmidt's work does have a few weaknesses, however, that future scholars would do well to correct. First, Schmidt struggles to articulate the warrant for this study. At the start, he justifies *Village Atheists* by pointing to the liter-

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ary figure of the village atheist, such as the fictional Judge York Driscoll in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Schmidt, however, does not establish the relationship between actual atheists and the literary character and is not, anyway, really interested in cultural representations. That explanation of the project is unconvincing. Later, Schmidt frames *Village Atheist* as the prehistory of twentieth-century court battles over the separation of church and state. His nineteenth-century atheists, though, are not mainly concerned with secularizing public space, but rather with the end of religion altogether. Even Charles B. Reynolds, who was convicted of blasphemy and fined $25 by the state of New Jersey, was less invested in the defense of free speech than he was in preaching secular salvation, "salvation from error, bigotry, fanaticism, and ignorance, insuring a more useful, better, nobler, and consequently happier life" (178). Reynolds' story and the stories of the other atheists included in this study sometimes connect to twentieth-century Supreme Court decisions, but the latter hardly seems like the justification for the former. Honestly, however, *Village Atheist* doesn't need such an elaborate warrant. It would be enough to say America has frequently understood itself as a Christian nation, and this is a study of how some people dissented.

A second issue is that there are instances where the historian's sympathy for his subjects seems to lead him to claims that are not quite substantiated. Schmidt argues, for example, that Elmina Slenker was not really prosecuted for obscenity, but for her atheism. His account doesn't bear this out: Anthony Comstock, the United States Postal Inspector who used all the power he could muster to prosecute every violation of Victorian sensibilities, went after Methodists, Episcopalians, and Jews just as vigorously as "infidels." Comstock may have thought atheism logically led to moral depravity, but he opposed obscenity wherever he saw it. Slenker, for her part, really was interested in subjects considered obscene, both then and now. Schmidt seems to want to protect Slenker from herself. He says, for example, Slenker's defense of bestiality was really only an argument for open inquiry. Perhaps, but such a claim requires more than an assertion. Historians of American atheism will have to find ways to reckon with their subjects' unlikability.

These issues do not detract from the merits of this marvelous monograph. Schmidt's work is engaging, readable, and eminently teachable. Perhaps most importantly, *Village Atheists* suggests new questions and new studies on every page. His detours—on how atheists used anti-Catholic rhetoric against Protestants (98-103), on an African-American atheist who billed himself "the only negro infidel" (140-41), on moments of Christian-atheist cooperation (185), on atheist efforts to get the Bible ruled obscene (241-43), and on and on—are themselves worth the price of the book. With *Village Atheist*, Schmidt draws the reader into the many and multifaceted questions of atheist life in America, and shows how four atheists made their zigzagging way in a Godly nation.

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