

# Secular Steeples, by Conrad Ostwalt

reviewed by [Daniel Born](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

More than half a century ago Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of a coming "postreligious" era. In his 1965 landmark bestseller, *The Secular City*, theologian Harvey Cox embraced secularization as a healthy and necessary corrective to the excesses of religious zeal. But by the 1990s most scholars of religion were rapidly reaching a different conclusion: that our age is better described as "postsecular."

One need only watch an episode of *The Simpsons* to get an idea of what they are talking about. Homer and Marge's lovable though frequently loutish family mixes a wild amalgam of irreverence and piety. In one characteristic episode described by Mark Pinsky, "Homer mistakes a waffle stuck to his ceiling for God, and then compounds the error by eating the waffle and mocking Communion by describing the taste as 'sacrelicious'" (*The Gospel According to the Simpsons*).

Though he doesn't bring the Simpsons to the table, Conrad Ostwalt, a professor of religion at Appalachian State University, seeks to explain how the new postsecular age shapes both formal religious institutions and secular culture. Ostwalt contends that the secularization thesis as it has been previously understood has broken down. Therefore, we must "posit a different way of thinking about secularization that does not require a polarization of secular and sacred but allows a commingling of the two." Ostwalt examines this new relationship through a survey of three kinds of cultural expression: space/place, text and image.

These chapters roam through such phenomena as the megachurch movement, literature and religion studies, and apocalyptic themes of both the religious and secular varieties in films such as *Left Behind* and *Waterworld*. His examples from literature and film, and analyses of institutions like Willow Creek Community Church and the intentional retro-utopian town of Love Valley, all reinforce one's sense that Ostwalt is perceptive about the strange mix of sacred and profane that permeates American life.

Unfortunately, *Secular Steeples* is uneven. While Ostwalt is right to argue that the secularization hypothesis must yield to something new in light of our present

situation, he does not sufficiently explore the long historical sweep of secularization theory per se. One would think from reading Ostwalt that Paul Van Buren's *Secular Meaning of the Gospel* and John A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God* were pioneering works in suggesting that religion is "making concession to secular cultural forms and becoming more like society in general in the struggle to stave off obsolescence." These books of the '60s were more of an endpoint than a beginning. They encapsulate what had happened during roughly the past 150 years, marked by the Enlightenment, during which religious thinkers conceded more and more terrain to secular (naturalistic and scientific) understanding.

For their part, the secularists--especially those of the 19th century--thought that clearing away the cobwebs of religion and superstition would lead to a happier, more prosperous world. To read Auguste Comte and George Eliot today is to be shaken both by the power and by the naïveté of their illusion. The smashing of this Enlightenment hope by the cataclysms of the 20th century--starting with World War I and ending with 9/11--has driven us to embrace a postsecular worldview.

In Ostwalt's defense, one can argue that his book is an investigation of the contemporary mingling of sacred and secular culture, not a treatise on the Enlightenment's impact on theology. Perhaps one shouldn't take him to task for the book he chose not to write. But the 18th- and 19th-century thinkers and writers who hoped to save religion by conceding its supernaturalist underpinnings to a naturalist, scientific worldview--think of Jefferson, Comte, Feuerbach and Eliot, just for starters--took rather more seriously than Ostwalt does the basic difference between sacred and secular perspectives on the world and our place in it. Had Ostwalt spent more time on this intellectual history, his book would sail with more dependable ballast.

This thin understanding of "sacred" and "secular" categories is demonstrated two-thirds of the way through the book when Ostwalt finally gets around to explaining what he means by religion: "Rather than defining religion as a set of truth claims, we would define religion as a process of making and searching for meaning." The impatience with dry epistemological models (those taken seriously, for instance, by Hans Küng in *Does God Exist?* and *Why I Am a Christian*) in favor of the therapeutic leap toward the "search for meaning" makes clear that Ostwalt has little interest in the history of ideas.

But there is a bigger problem with Ostwalt's approach. To define the making of meaning as always and already religious essentially denies the possibility of a

secular pursuit of meaning. If I choose to make meaning for myself, must I by definition call myself "religious"? I don't think so, but Ostwalt insists that any such activity amounts to "functioning religiously."

There is little room for secular dissent under Ostwalt's big umbrella. This makes his ongoing patter about the commingling of secular and sacred influences (a warm bath of harmony rather than the chill shock of combat) ultimately difficult to fathom. Or perhaps that gentle commingling is simply of a piece with the Rogerian therapeutic definition of religion.

Ostwalt's chapters on sacred space and megachurches, based on close observation of Willow Creek Church in suburban Chicago, are his most entertaining and enlightening. Here he historicizes the way secular forces and aesthetic styles have worked their way into Christianity from the very beginning, starting with the Roman Empire.

Willow Creek's borrowing of shopping mall features and décor may seem new, but actually is part of a long church tradition of adopting the larger culture's architecture and rituals. When Ostwalt focuses specifically on space and ritual, two clearly empirical phenomena, his distinctions between sacred and secular categories make sense.

In his description of the megachurch phenomenon Ostwalt treats the critical question of whether aesthetics themselves produce the religious experience, but he could go further in teasing out the class, gender and regional influences that make up the particular aesthetic of those churches. Ostwalt begins to do this when he points out that "MTV style music" and a "Rappelling Rambo" Father's Day film clip provide two windows into the megachurch soul.

What kind of worshiper is drawn to this style, and what kind is put off? I know an Episcopalian who calls the megachurches' worship services of the "praise" variety "Branson worship," in which congregational singing can be characterized as the "7-11" variety ("seven words, sung 11 times") or "throw-up" music (as in "Let's throw that up on the overhead projector"). I know Catholics who have been practically driven back to their pre-Vatican II faith out of reaction to the guitar folk mass.

Perhaps asking Ostwalt to explain these complicated interactions between sacred vision and the profane arts is tantamount to asking for an explanation of how Margot Kidder and Gary Busey got starring roles in the LaHaye-Jenkins pre-Trib thriller *Left*

*Behind.* I have a feeling that Bart Simpson knows the answer, and has already talked it over with Homer and his Bible-quoting neighbor Ned Flanders.