

*The Secular Mind*, by Robert Coles

reviewed by [Steven M. Tipton](#) in the [September 22, 1999](#) issue

This meditation on faith's fragility could not come at a better time. At once deeply personal and profound in its feel for how our culture settles into our hearts and minds, it puts to shame the sectarian champions of the culture wars, waged against "secular elites," and it confounds the academic experts who miss the religious resonance of our worldly experience.

Precisely because Robert Coles is explicitly at the center of this book, it sets out with sure feeling a subtle argument about the secularity of conventional religious piety and the graceful mystery of secular life. Because Coles has crystallized and taught this argument over decades, he can make it come alive by interweaving chapters of his own life and work with an original overview of biblical tradition and 20th-century scholarship in theology, literature and the social sciences.

Coles traces secularism in the biblical tradition, interweaving biblical exegesis and theological interpretation with psychological and social analysis. Jeremiah and St. Paul, Kierkegaard and Barth, Freud and Weber all inform a vivid quick-sketch of our experience of what human goodness can mean. It is rooted in the continuity of prophetic Judaism with Jesus of Nazareth as a soul-stirred, troubling "reform Jew." It is seen in the light of a Mississippi tenant farmer and a New England factory worker, no less than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, embodying "the sanctity of faith enacted in the here, the now of a lived life."

To map the interplay of sacred and secular in 19th-century life, Coles plunges into George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and George Meredith's *The Egoist*. He emerges with an account of Karen Horney on her deathbed, reading Meredith and telling Coles what it means to be alone in the midst of all the company we keep, "deaf to anyone's avowal of love," with "no voice of conscience addressing you." This conception of conscience as "the voices of others who live inside us, their pleas and misgivings and worries and injunctions and admonitions all become ours to attend, to heed" fills out Coles's objections to Freud. It anchors his later use of Thomas Hardy to show how the sovereignty of a rationalized, scientized selfhood and the pilgrimage of higher education accompany the divisions of modern social classes and institutions,

even as they lead to peculiarly modern leaps of faith and aesthetic efforts to bridge faith and reason.

In mapping where we stand today as the intersection of the sacred and secular, Coles pursues themes of self-love and alienation. From William Carlos Williams pondering prayers for one's sovereign self to God as "a Big Pal of ours," Coles moves through David's Psalms and Augustine's *Confessions* to Freudian psychoanalysis. Then he tacks back to Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor pondering sin, grace and redemption in our time. He closes with Pascal, the Augustinian religious realist, chiding Freud, the Stoic secular realist, for his promethean, utopian faith in scientific reason and progress.

Modern myths of progress and reason commit us fervently to the future. Coles moves ingeniously from varieties of modern utopia and dystopia—Edward Bellamy and Henry George, Czeslaw Milosz and Stanislaw Witkiewicz, Aldous Huxley and Philip K. Dick—to neuroscientific efforts to better grasp and control how the brain works, thereby turning mind back into matter and so both superseding psychoanalysis and fulfilling Freud's physiological prophecy.

Will the old ambition of the totalitarian state to remake the psyche in its brave new image come to be realized by neuropharmacology? More broadly, asks Coles, how are we to sustain the personal, reflective destiny of our moral and spiritual selves "amidst the crushing institutional forces of the state, but also, of the marketplace, and yes, the church in its decidedly secular aspects"?

Coles writes wonderfully sinuous prose, with a conversational give-and-take that carries the reader along, even when Coles as interviewer, reader and interlocutor leaps from one dramatic partner to another or plunges into detailed exegesis of a text. From anecdotes and exegeses, Coles makes memorable, powerful parables. Such is his genius as a listener-storyteller unafraid of moral perplexity and revelation.