

America's Secular Challenge: The Rise of a New National Religion, by Herbert London. New York and London: Encounter Books, 2008, 100 pp., \$18.00 hardbound.

Twined Patients

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Hudson Institute president (and *AQ* consulting editor) Herbert London's *America's Secular Challenge: The Rise of a New National Religion* paints in broad strokes the portrait of a society shrinking into a narcissism that leaves it naked before its enemies. The book's pessimism runs deep. America's and the West's elites, disenchanted with Christianity, trade a clear moral compass and cultural pride for a meandering and increasingly self-hating relativism. Popular culture loses itself in materialism, sensation, and life for the moment. These themes, while not

novel, are handled by London with a crispness, punch, and relevance to contemporary challenges, especially radical Islam, which depresses when it doesn't wholly unnerve.

The academy comes in for a well-merited share of concrete blame for this demoralization. Yet for a reader primarily interested in higher education the book also suggests some more abstract parallels. London argues that cultures need a sense of the transcendent in order to survive. Without some belief in a higher good the self-discipline and resolve necessary to face existential challenges evaporates. Symptomatic of this state is a preoccupation with trifles which rush to fill the resulting cultural vacuum.

A similar thesis can surely be advanced about the contemporary university. American higher education once had a very definite sense of overarching purpose largely defined by religion. Even after this weakened, there still remained a sense of civic mission, centered on the American democratic creed. But once this too waned, all that was left was a dedication to scholarly specialization and professional self-seeking, counterparts, it might be contended, to the beliefs London more globally indicts: the sufficiency

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of technocracy and consumer comforts for providing a satisfying and viable way of life. If that's true then the flood of intellectual grotesqueries and indulgences that have swept through the academy during the last four decades should hardly surprise. As cultural detritus they are as much the leavings of a moral meltdown as are the more inane and debauched products of the marketplace.

According to this diagnosis, rebuilding the academy, as much as rebuilding

the culture, will require rediscovering purposes capable of binding individuals and giving them a renewed sense of collective inspiration. As to how this is to be done for the United States and the West as a whole, London—not surprisingly—provides no easy answer; nor is one obviously on hand for American higher education. If London is right about the underlying malady, and he makes a thoughtful case, we have a set of patients who will be very hard to cure.