“We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being,” the Supreme Court declared in Zorach v. Clauson in 1952. For most of American history, Leigh Eric Schmidt, a professor at the Center for Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis, reminds us, non-believers were maligned, marginalized and barred from holding public office.

In “Village Atheists,” Schmidt provides an engaging examination of unbelief in the 19th and early 20th centuries at the grassroots. His subjects — lecturer Samuel Porter Putnam, cartoonist Watson Heston, former minister C.B. Reynolds, sex reformer Elmina Slenker and members of the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism (4A) — were not metaphysicians, arguing fine points of theology, but “aggrieved contrarians stunned at the moral shabbiness of scriptural stories” and rapacious, manipulative ministers. Emerging from “an intricate web of everyday encounters,” they experienced “estrangements” that were “visceral, relational and densely particular.”

Schmidt’s freethinkers were flamethrowers. “Religion is a big burning boil, preachers are pimples, churches are cancers, and piety is pus,” Putnam proclaimed. Heston, who provided illustrations for more than 1,600 issues of The Truth Seeker, railed against Sunday closing laws, army chaplains, and tax exemptions for “temples of superstition.”

And, Schmidt demonstrates, while some Americans treated infidels with forbearance and prayerful opposition, outspoken atheists often paid a heavy price for their expressions of dissent. Reynolds was tried for blasphemy. Slenker was prosecuted for sending obscene material in the U.S. mail. Most important, Schmidt writes, “being a village atheist invited cold shoulders; being a female village atheist doubly so.”
In the past hundred years, Schmidt indicates, freethinkers have gained some ground. Secularist challenges to religious tests for public office, prayers and Bible reading in schools, and conscientious objection were upheld by the Supreme Court. A post-9/11 bumper sticker read: “Science flies you to the moon; religion flies you into buildings.” “We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers,” Barack Obama proclaimed in his 2009 inaugural address. Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Susan Jacoby, and Bill Maher, Schmidt points out, have emerged as popular “new atheists.” By 2014, about 23 percent of Americans asserted that they are not religious.

That said, Schmidt emphasizes that the conflict between theists and atheists is far from over. Evangelicals remain politically powerful. Many atheists still choose to fly under the radar. After all, it’s easier for an openly gay candidate than an atheist to win an election.

In 2011, Schmidt writes, when Jessica Ahlquist, a 16-year-old high school student in Rhode Island, filed a lawsuit (supported by the American Civil Liberties Union) to remove a religious banner invoking “Our Heavenly Father” from the school auditorium, she was subjected to so many threats that the police had to escort her to class. After a federal judge found in her favor, Jessica’s state representative blasted her on talk radio as “an evil little thing.”

In our godly nation, Schmidt concludes, “that twofold image of the village infidel — of stigmatized marginality and gutsy nonconformity — retains its allusive force.”

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