


## BOOK REVIEW

### Edward B. Davis, *Protestant Modernist Pamphlets: Science and Religion in the Scopes Era*

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024. Pp. 336. ISBN 978-1-4214-4982-1. \$64.95 (hardcover).

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Originally established in 1880 as the Correspondence School for Hebrew, the American Institute for Sacred Literature (AISL) offered continuing education for a wide network of Protestant ministers and Sunday school teachers interested in modern biblical scholarship and theology of the kind practised at the University of Chicago Divinity School. *Protestant Modernist Pamphlets* republishes a series of ten AISL pamphlets on Science and Religion written by prominent scientists and clergymen and broadly distributed (hundreds of thousands of copies were printed) over the course of the 1920s and the early 1930s as a response to William Jennings Bryan's attacks on the teaching of evolution in public schools in 1922. More than just a critical edition, the book offers a window into the key scientific and clerical personalities, organizational ecosystem and financial networks that attempted to coordinate a liberal Protestant alternative to a conversation that fundamentalists often attempted to characterize in terms of a life-and-death struggle between faith and unbelief.

Although the ten AISL pamphlets themselves constitute the centrepiece of the book, these are preceded by a substantial first part that serves as an extended introduction. A first chapter sets the scene by surveying Bryan's post-war attack on Darwinism and the mixed responses that he elicited from the American scientific elite. A second part then focuses in on the scientists who thought an organized response necessary and narrates the processes of ideation, fundraising and solicitation that created the pamphlets. A third chapter attempts a summary overview and evaluation of the 'modernist response' to Bryan represented by the pamphlets, highlighting how many of the authors adopted revisionist conceptions of theology, god and life after death. In the second part, each reprinted pamphlet is preceded by a short introduction that includes biographical details about the author or authors and selections from their other writings on religion or science. A short appendix contains a series of tables that summarize the publication histories of the pamphlets and gives print numbers (where available), extensive lists of scientists who donated to support their publication and how much they contributed.

The stated goal of *Protestant Modernist Pamphlets* is to supplement existing attempts to understand the Scopes trial by highlighting the perspectives of leading scientists and modernist clergy seeking to provide an alternative to fundamentalist religion. The book's narrow focus on the AISL pamphlets is both its greatest strength and a potential source of disappointment. On the one hand, the book's attentiveness to biographical, interpersonal and even organizational minutiae allows for a detail-rich glimpse into the lives of key figures and the broad network of relationships and organizations working in the orbit of the

University of Chicago. The survey of personal correspondence, books, unpublished drafts, donor lists, newspapers, periodicals and syllabi sheds light not only on the final product, but also on the various pamphlets and alternative schemes that never came to be. These and other details – such as the way that fundraising for the pamphlets focused on seeking contributions from ‘starred scientists’ listed in various editions of *American Men of Science* – give a valuable glimpse into the goals and ideals of a core group of connected and influential public intellectuals and make claims about the professionalization of science quite concrete.

On the other hand, *Protestant Modernist Pamphlets* brings up tantalizing glimpses into broader issues that the pamphlets broach, but often sidesteps them, choosing instead to focus on the religious opinions of the AISL authors and the extent to which they departed from traditional doctrines or creeds. The pamphlets provide examples of how support for evolution and eugenics blended almost seamlessly for the pamphlet writers, but the book does not provide context on theories of the germ line or reflect on the potential significance of the entanglements of new scientific institutions with differing forms of racism. Despite presenting the AISL authors as public intellectuals concerned about the place of science in public life, the ways in which their support for evolution may be tied up with specific visions of political or social reform is underexplored, even as the pamphlets complicate the contours of what is at stake in a debate about religion and science. Other work has situated the Scopes trial and the conflict over the teaching of evolution in public schools with attention to the history of biology, the history of public education, socialist politics and even studies of race and gender, among others. *Protestant Modernist Pamphlets*, however, does not reference or draw on this scholarship, fixing its focus on complicating the ‘conflict thesis’ by highlighting the contested character of both ‘religion’ and ‘science’ vis-à-vis the modernist/fundamentalist divide. The pamphlets thus serve to shed light on a very select set of figures (white, male and liberal Protestant) often overlooked by a scholarship that focuses on their fundamentalist opponents, but mostly only insofar as it pertains to their religious commitments and therefore at the cost of leaving one to wonder who and what else ought not to remain overlooked.

*Protestant Modernist Pamphlets* introduces an important set of documents that have the potential to serve as a jumping-off point for further scholarship on the period, even more so given the academic prominence and influence that many of the key figures had on fields and institutions (such as the American Association for the Advancement of Science) that continue to exist today. The book’s focus on religion ought not to detract from the thick and diverse texture of ideas and perspectives that do come through in the pamphlets themselves. While students may find the minutiae of the introductory first part tedious, teachers may find it especially profitable to use one or more of the first three pamphlets by Edward Grant Conklin, Harry Emerson Fosdick or Shailer Mathews alongside Bryan’s ‘The menace of Darwinism’ as primary-source material to introduce the Scopes trial as something other than a courtroom showdown in which scientists appear only as expert witnesses and not as religious, political and organizational actors in their own right.