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In Secularization and Cultural Criticism, Vincent P. Pecora, the Gordon B. Hinckley Professor of British Literature and Culture at the University of Utah, argues that the attempt to construct a “secular” cultural criticism, à la Edward Said, is a much more problematic endeavour than it might appear at first blush. Pecora’s thesis is that employing secular language does not free cultural criticism from the influence of religious categories or from questions of ultimate meaning. Thus, although Pecora does not use the term “implicit religion,” he is essentially writing about the religiosity implicit in ostensibly secular cultural criticism.

For Pecora, the history of both secularization and the secularization thesis is complex and intricately related to the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition and its rise to hegemonic stature globally. Secular criticism, according to Pecora, appeals to fundamental values which are “religious” in terms of both their historical roots and their sociological functions. Because secularization is a diverse and uneven process, a secular cultural criticism must, in Pecora’s view, confront the messy, and often unsavory, reality of the secularization process, rather than glibly accept a simple mythical secularization process uncritically. Failure to critically engage with the realities of secularization may lead, Pecora thinks, to the implicit acceptance of ideas which may have undesired implications.

In Chapter 1, Pecora develops his thesis that a completely secular criticism is an impossibility, by discussing the work of Talal Assad, Edward Said, Michel Foucault, Jurgen Habermas, Max Weber, Alisdair McIntyre, Gauri Viswanathan, Bernard Lewis, and Hans Blumenberg. Chapter 2 deals with similar ideas but focuses more narrowly on the secularization of the concept of “redemption,” through a discussion of the work of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer. In Chapter 3, Pecora discusses the secularization of religion and the concomitant sacralization of society in the work of Emile Durkheim. While Pecora seems to be an admirer of Durkheim, he nonetheless points to a threat of totalitarianism in the de-
Secularization and Cultural Criticism is a challenging and thought-provoking book. It seems to be designed to be read by people who are (1) familiar with the broad range of social critics who have written over the past 200 years, who are (2) fascinated by the history of secularization as well as by the history of writing about secularization, and who do not need to be convinced (3) of the meaning and value of cultural criticism. I suspect this is a small group. I definitely meet the second criterion and come close enough to meeting the first, but I will admit that I fail with regard to the third criterion. I would have liked to see a more straightforward discussion of what cultural criticism is, and why it is important.

This is a book of great insight and prodigious erudition. There is much of value here, so it is unfortunate that some readers will find Pecora's ideas less than accessible.