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IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

John Lardas Modern

IN THIS PIONEERING ACCOUNT OF RELIGION AND society in nineteenth-century America, John Lardas Modern discovers surprising connections among secular ideology, the density of media information, and the rise of new technologies that opened up new ways of being religious. As he explores the eruptions of religion in New York's penny presses, the budding fields of anthropology and phrenology, Sing Sing State Penitentiary, and *Moby-Dick*, Modern challenges the strict separation between the religious and the secular that remains integral to discussions about religion today.

This book reveals that secularism was more than an ideology in antebellum America—it was an intricate and widely shared set of political and epistemological assumptions revolving around the concept of religion. Modern shows how religion became the object of intense discussion within Protestant subcultures and beyond. He details the processes by which religion was conceptualized as something that was either true or false, something that could be historicized, dissected, and commodified. These processes also possessed a technological hue as rail lines and telegraph wires spread, steam power was harnessed, and everyday tasks became mechanized. Even as networks of transportation, information, and commerce expanded the range of possible beliefs, the convergence of those networks limited the range itself.

Modern frames his study around the wonder and paranoia of being haunted, arguing that explanations of enchantment fueled secularism's emergence. The experience of spectral energies coincided with attempts to tame the unruly fruits of secularism—in the cultivation of a spiritual self among Unitarians, for instance, or in John Murray Spear's erotic longings for a perpetual motion machine. Combining rigorous theoretical inquiry with beguiling historical arcana, *Secularism in Antebellum America* unsettles long-held views of religion and the methods of narrating its past.