

David W Fletcher, Spring 2005

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JAMES GILBERT'S *REDEEMING CULTURE*:
AMERICAN RELIGION IN AN AGE OF SCIENCE

*Redeeming Culture: American Religion in an Age of Science*¹ by James Gilbert, professor of history at the University of Maryland, explores the intersect of religion and science in the United States from about 1925 until the mid-1960s. Gilbert wants to assess the role of religion's clash and collusion with science in public culture and "in particular . . . the opening of cultural space for religious ideas in an otherwise scientific world" (15). In his mind, the persistence of religion in the modern world presents questions like: How does religion keep its place of importance in American culture? How does religion stay vital in a dynamic, pluralistic, secular society? Gilbert's intent is not to provide intellectual, philosophical, or sociological answers to his queries. His intent lies in discovering the interaction of religion and science "not just as theories and theologies but also as everyday ideas" (4).

Gilbert hopes to illuminate "the process whereby American culture is assembled and integrated." He believes that, for the period of inquiry, scientists and religionists conducted a "joint venture" to unveil a "new religious-scientific dispensation" (4). This supposed collusion undergirds his thesis about American cultural formation. Instead of "isolated subcultures" acting "in self-styled obscurity," he sees individuals and groups responding "to questions that discharge like sheet lightning across the sky" (20). This, in Gilbert's view, is the key modus operandi of

¹Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997, 407 pages with acknowledgements, 48 illustrations, conclusion, notes, and index.

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cultural formation in an ever-changing, modern society like the United States. And, in this case, variant cultural products of a new relationship between religion and science evolved.

Gilbert does not tell this story of religion and science in modern America according to strict chronology or even thematically. As he says, he wants to be suggestive rather than comprehensive, episodic not encyclopedic (4). He selects samples from a large pool of possibilities. He does this, in part, because of his own personal interests and also due to his methodological intent. Gilbert desires to open up windows on cultural space and cultural production. He apparently wishes to let the reader peer into one set of circumstances, back away from them, then look at another set of circumstances with different actors in a different context. This exploratory approach can be confusing, since it lacks continuity and a sense of connectedness. But the value lies in its rich, impressionistic portrait of the symbiotic “narrative world” of the Bible/biology, belief/reason, or metaphysical/naturalistic dialogue (12).

Gilbert starts with “William Jennings Bryan, Scientist” and rehashes, although from an unusual perspective, the 1925 Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee (chapter 2). He examines “The Republic of Science” and “A World Without John Dewey” to suggest the ascendancy but controversy of science in modern American culture (chapters 3 and 4). Next, he explores adaptations of “creationist science” by the government and the military after World War II in “A Magnificent Laboratory, a Magnificent Control Room,” “Churching American Soldiers,” and “Rendezvous at Rancho La Brea” (chapters 5, 6, and 7).

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Gilbert proceeds to the interchange of religion and science in the 1950s. “Two Men of Science” looks at the work of Immanuel Velikovsky, its critique by Harlow Shapley, and its unlikely defense by Horace Kallen (chapter 8). “Almost a Message from God Himself” explores the cosmological films produced by Frank Capra under the aegis of Bell Telephone Laboratories (chapter 9). Then, he jumps to UFOs and flying saucers, professional organizations like the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Religious Research Association, begun in 1949 and 1951, respectively, and integrative efforts by the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, founded in 1954 (“Transgressing the Heavens,” “The Religious Possibilities of Social Science,” and “The Religion of Science,” chapters 10, 11, and 12). Lastly, Gilbert opens the cultural window on a significant public space that witnessed, however inadvertently, interaction between religion and science in the early 1960s—the World’s Fair in Seattle (“Space Gothic in Seattle,” chapter 13).

Throughout *Redeeming Culture*, Gilbert’s illuminations reveal how intertwined religion and science had become, especially in relation to American politics. For the period under review, he notes an “entangling alliance” between ideas about democracy and the ongoing dialogue of religion and science. He thinks that it may be impossible to separate this political ideology, and its resultant practice, from arguments about religion and science. Too, he observes a never-ending struggle for power in American society, what he calls “the perennial contest over cultural authority? Who shall speak for science and religion?” (19). He then underscores the pervasive

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influence of both religion and science as “ways of thinking,” or as pragmatic and theoretical world views for commoners and intellectuals, on the streets and in professional circles.

If *Redeeming Culture* enthralls the reader with Gilbert’s wonderfully descriptive and interesting lead-ins to his topics, it equally bewilders the reader with a morass of seemingly unrelated details that unfold as each chapter progresses. As well, it is not always clear which perspective Gilbert is using as the basis of his analysis—the viewpoint of religion or the outlook of science. Just like endless adjustments in cultural formation, Gilbert alters his vista quickly and persistently. For certain, though, is Gilbert’s vision about how religion and science in modern America converge, separate, and then reemerge as culturally-altered phenomena.

But anyone who approaches Gilbert’s showcase on “cultural space” and “cultural production” would do well to understand that he looks at religion and science quite differently than authors like Sam Harris, a doctoral student in neuroscience at Stanford University. Harris, in his *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), argues that religion (based on faith) and science (based on reason) are fundamentally incompatible and irreconcilable. The models used by Harris and Gilbert stand in opposition diametrically to each other. According to Gilbert, culture conflates what logic and reason must distinguish, and this idea he illustrates ably in his *Redeeming Culture*.