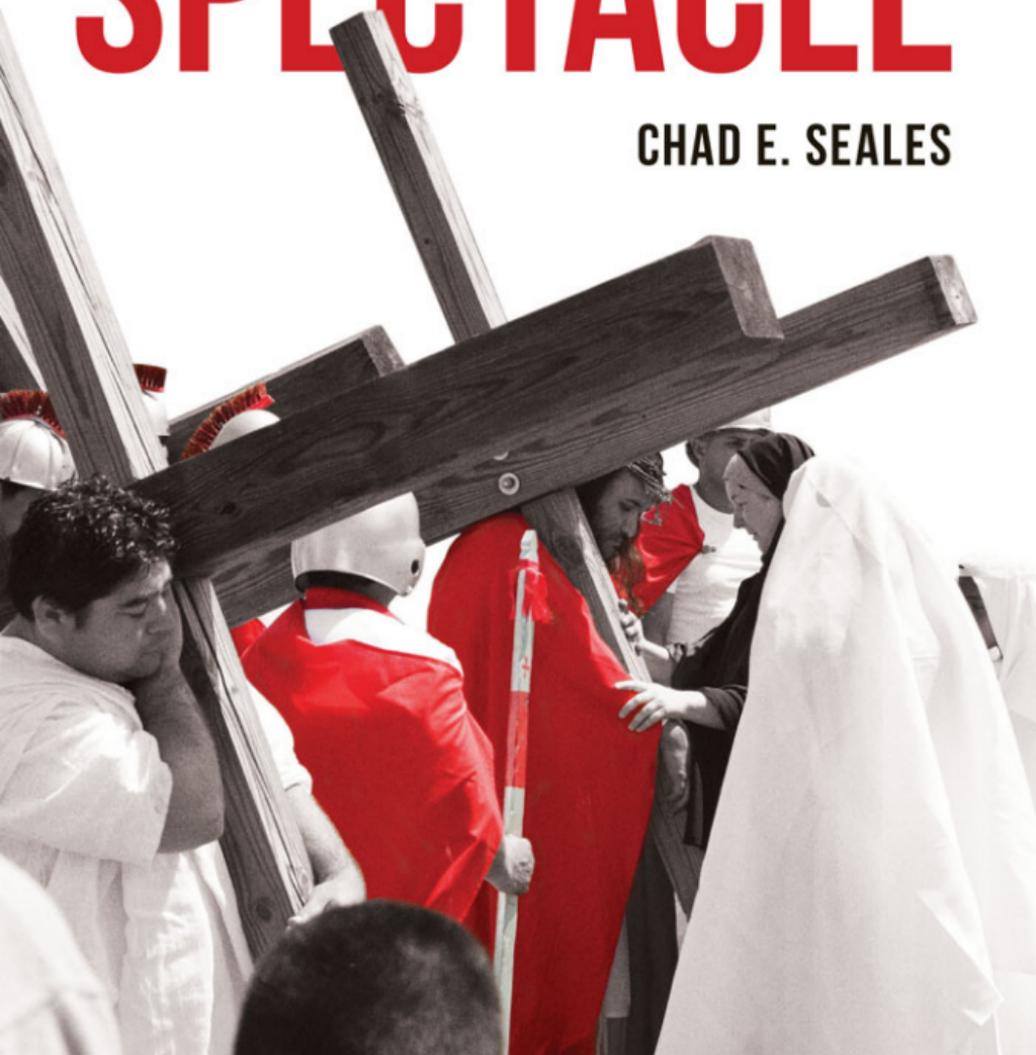


PERFORMING RELIGION IN A SOUTHERN TOWN

THE SECULAR SPECTACLE

CHAD E. SEALES



The Secular Spectacle

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The Secular Spectacle

*Performing Religion in a
Southern Town*



CHAD E. SEALES

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To Emily

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction: Secularism	i
1. Industry	25
2. Nationalism	44
3. Civility	66
4. Privatization	87
5. Migration	114
Postscript: Silence	144
<i>Notes</i>	163
<i>Index</i>	225

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Finally, this book is for the person who has known about Siler City almost as long as she has known me. She has heard, "It is almost finished" for several years now. She has listened to three completely different arguments with at least five different titles. And for some reason, she is still smiling. With love, this is for my wife Emily Major Seales and our sons, Adlai and Emmett, who arrived right on time.

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The Secular Spectacle

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Introduction: Secularism

This is a brave spectacle, to see how death is destroyed, not by another's work, but by its own; is stabbed with its own weapon, and, like Goliath, is beheaded with its own sword.

MARTIN LUTHER¹

SOUTHERN SECULARISM IS a greasy pig. This book attempts to catch the greasy pig in a particular place, to tangle it in themes and contain it with chronology. But the subject is elusive, and easily slips the grasp.

On July 4th 1907, a crowd gathered in a field near downtown Siler City, North Carolina, to watch five men prepare the pig for the greasy pig race. They were several rows deep, a few hundred figures in dark coats, light shirts,

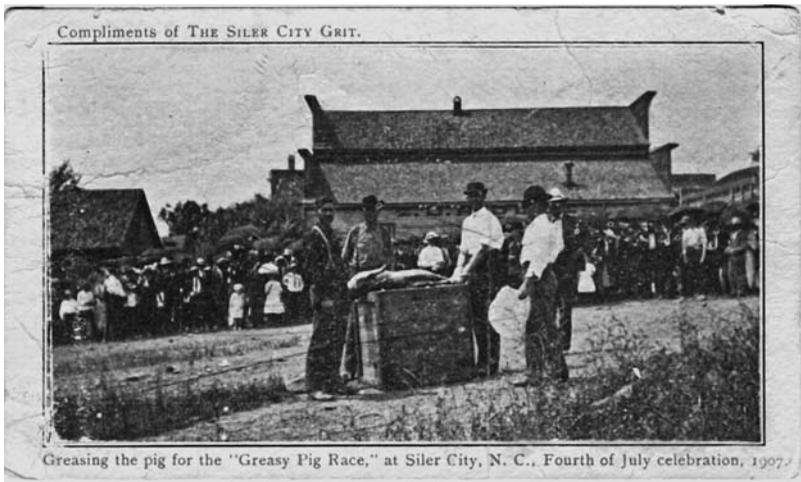


FIGURE 0.1 Greasing the Pig for the "Greasy Pig Race" at Siler City, N.C. Fourth of July Celebration, 1907. Credit: North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill.

and black ties. Silhouettes in white, of two boys, one smaller than the other, and two girls, one carrying a parasol, dotted the front row. A woman stood at the center. In front of them, at a reasonable distance, the men held the pig by its front legs, turned on its side, atop a wooden crate. The local newspaper issued postcards of the scene, “compliments of *The Siler City Grit*.”

The pig race was a tradition—along with a downtown parade, public speeches, Protestant prayer, and a baseball game and other athletic contests—during the annual Siler City Fourth of July celebration, inaugurated in 1901. As part of that tradition, the men set the pig loose, once they finished greasing it. Then the daring chased after it. If someone caught the pig, he got to keep it. But no one cared so much to see the catch. The fun was watching the boys miss, again and again, seeing them kick up dust and eat dirt. Everyone rooted for the pig.

The contest ended when someone captured the prize. Sometimes, though, it was too much for that individual to solely possess the greasy pig. Sometimes he wanted to keep the game going. In 1911, Charles Jones caught the pig after it ran through the crowd. Later the same day, he “turned the pig loose” during a baseball game. The ball players could not pitch or hit, steal second or round third—not with a greasy pig on the field. The spectators loved it. But after a good chase, the pig broke containment, escaping the ball field to find “refuge in a swamp nearby.”² Out of sight, it was back to business as usual, making outs and counting innings.

Like the greasy pig race, the ritual performances of southern secularism were difficult to contain. They often began in clearly demarcated spaces, but they seldom remained there. They traversed shifting territories. Yet, despite the perpetual motion, local sponsors of secular rites offered a willing audience an impressive feeling of spatial stability, even as they continually relocated their scenic boundaries. With each movement and migration, they declared their social distinctions verifiable facts, and maintained, using in some cases scientific method, that the newly defined was indeed historical record.

In Siler City, the principle performance of southern secularism, the downtown Fourth of July parade, originated in the white business district, crossed over the railroad tracks, and ended at a town park on the edge of an upper-class white neighborhood. By the early twentieth century, the parishioners and pastors of the First Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church occupied the homes of that neighborhood, which residents labeled “Palestine” because “the aspect of the area suggested the Holy Land to the minds of some observers.”³ In contrast, residents used the term “Hell’s Half Acre” to describe an industrial area that included at least



FIGURE 0.2 First Methodist Episcopal Church, South of Siler City, dedicated 1887, located at 121 South Chatham Avenue. Source: Wade Hampton Hadley, *The Town of Siler City* (Siler City, NC: Caviness Printing Service, Inc., 1986).



FIGURE 0.3 Methodist Protestant Church of Siler City, built around 1895. Source: Hadley, *The Town of Siler City*.

three mills and a factory just across the railroad tracks. The *Grit* even reported the distinction. Offering his commentary, editor Isaac London wrote in 1914, “Angel food and deviled ham—what a mixture; as bad as the names of two sections of Siler City. One section, the eastern, is known as Hell’s Half Acre, and the western part is known as Palestine.”⁴ A century later, no one referred

to those parts of town by their religious place-names. But the neighborhood patterns that once evoked biblical comparisons persisted upon the landscape. Stately older homes with green yards and large trees lined South Dogwood Avenue and West Dolphin Street, the streets of former Palestine. Across the tracks, the area once known as Hell's Half Acre remained an industrial parcel, with a dilapidated warehouse, cement plant, and poultry plant.

Milo Holt, a Siler resident since the late 1920s, did not remember the earlier terms "Palestine" and "Hell's Half Acre" ever being used. He did tell me, however, that many of the members and all of the preachers from the two downtown Methodist churches "lived on 'The Hill.'" His family attended the Methodist Protestant Church, and they lived on The Hill as well. He also remembered that when he was a kid, they all walked together with their neighbors through the street down the hill to church for Sunday services.⁵

After World War II, Milo recalled, some of The Hill's earliest residents relocated to other parts of town to avoid an encroaching working class. Offering me a driving tour, he explained that when lower-class white residents earned enough money to buy into the neighborhood, its higher-class white citizens built homes in a more removed area. Eventually, a few among those upwardly mobile could afford a home in that neighborhood. So in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the upper class moved again, this time to the Pine Forest neighborhood, built around the Siler City Country Club.⁶



FIGURE 0.4 Street in Neighborhood Formerly Known as Palestine, 2004. Photo by Author.



FIGURE 0.5 Dilapidated Building in Industrial Area Formerly Known as Hell's Half Acre, 2004. Photo by Author.

Opening in 1957, the Club and surrounding neighborhood was an enclave for a racial class, limited to whites who could afford the membership dues and house payments. Both the Club and the neighborhood remained de facto segregated spaces, after racial integration in the 1970s. Based on 1990 census data, 100 percent of Pine Forest residents were white.⁷ When I visited the Club in 2004 for lunch with a First United Methodist Church minister, all of the patrons were white, an African American woman waited the table, and Latinos worked in the kitchen.

Siler City always has been a small town. In 1900, there were 2,222 residents in Matthews Township, the designation for the Siler area.⁸ In 1950, there were 2,501 residents within the city limits.⁹ And in 1990, there were 4,995 residents.¹⁰ Throughout those years, the racial demographics remained somewhere near 30 percent black and 70 percent white, according to US census records. That all changed, though, with the arrival of new migrants in the last decade of the twentieth century. From 1990 to 2000, the number of Hispanic residents increased from 3 percent (147 persons) to nearly 40 percent (2,740 persons) of the town's total population.¹¹ Suddenly, for some longtime residents, Siler was no longer a southern town. Almost overnight, it seemed to them, their town had been remade into something else. "You know what they call Siler City now?" asked a local of an out-of-town visitor. "Little Mexico!" the local declared, answering his own question.¹²

In 2006, I attended a panel discussion at the local Jordan-Matthews High School on how the rapid demographic shift had impacted the school and the

community. There, I heard an African American teacher describe a moment in which she felt her students shared an experience across racial and ethnic lines. Ms. Price, as she is called at school, explained that the students typically self-segregated. She said this was evident during lunch, when white students gathered at tables with whites, blacks with blacks, and Latinos with Latinos. The last group subdivided themselves by nationalist affiliations and even further by region and hometown within their sending countries. One day in class, Ms. Price saw a Latina student arranging pencils on her desk. Intrigued by the sight, she asked the student what she was doing. The student answered, "This is how we do it at the Club." She explained to the teacher that she worked at the Siler City Country Club and as part of her job she set tables. She was setting her desk as she had learned to set those tables, using pencils instead of cutlery. With a laugh, Ms. Price recalled that she "told the rest of the students that they could act like they were at the Club." Following the student's lead, she said, "We pretended that we went to the Club."¹³

The historical arc that connects The Hill to the Club traces a local story of the rise and run of public religion in America. Religious historians have structured that broader story using narratives of secularization or secularism, recounting the institutional transformation of the sacred into the profane or the institutional diffusion of a religious spirit into a secular ethos. In 1968, historian William A. Clebsch considered the "aspirations of Americans sacred in origin and their achievements profane in fruition," arguing that "religion in America sought ceaselessly to call into being the City of God, and with striking consistency found itself having built instead the cities of man."¹⁴ Surveying the same landscape, but with a narrower focus, the contributors to William R. Hutchison's 1989 edited collection, *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America*, detailed the public demise of liberal Protestantism, which peaked in the 1950s and subsequently declined as it succumbed to the challenges of secularization, religious pluralism, and conservative evangelicalism.¹⁵ Voicing a prevailing sentiment, Dorothy Bass argued in her contribution to that volume that those Protestants hastened their own decline, as they promoted the secularization of civic life (particularly in public schools, because they did not want to use government funds for Catholic education), which eroded their cultural authority.¹⁶

In accounts such as those cited above, secularization is an associative pattern signifying the transformation of religion from sacred to profane and from public to private. Disestablishment was the catalyst of that transformation, as the state displaced church authority in civil matters, inaugurating a political cleansing of sectarian demands from civic space.¹⁷ Outlining the

boundaries of civil society, the state permitted that which it relegated to the private domain—religion—to reenter the public sphere. In the United States, a public form of liberal Protestantism underwrote the terms of the removal and reentry of religion as a universal category from civil society, dictating the social policies and political workings of secularism.¹⁸

American secularism, then, was the proliferative process that offered institutional life for public Protestantism after its political death, providing techniques for the rebirth of Protestant beliefs and practices as immanent within the categories of Christianity and, more generally, religion.¹⁹ Tracy Fessenden describes secularism as “the ability of a Protestantized conception of religion to control the meanings of both the religious *and* the secular.”²⁰ Secularism in the United States identified what Talal Asad has described as “new concepts” of “religion” in relation to the “epistemic category” of “the secular.” A “political doctrine” that attempted to purify the public sphere of exclusivist particularity, secularism posited the modern state as the principal vehicle to “transcend the different identities built on class, gender, and religion, replacing conflicting perspectives by unifying experience.” Secularism “*is*,” Asad contends, that “transcendent mediation.”²¹

The case of Palestine and Hell’s Half Acre fits within these frames of secularization and secularism, presenting a regionalized portrait for comparison with other views of American religions. When institutional boundaries and social hierarchies were taking shape in the early twentieth century, a group of white southerners—those who attended the First Methodist Episcopal Church, South and the Methodist Protestant Church—used religious language to designate their neighborhood as sacred, as set apart from the rest of the town. If they were uncertain where they stood in the social order, they looked down to the east, toward Hell’s Half Acre. If other residents were uncertain, they looked up to the west, toward the neighborhood of Palestine. By the 1930s, the religious particularity of place-names faded into a generic designation. As Clebsch claimed on a larger scale, religion moved from sacred to profane. The term “Palestine” was no longer necessary because everyone knew that those Methodists lived on that hill. They saw them walk the streets together on Sunday mornings, a pilgrimage from brick houses to steepled churches that connected sacred space to sacred place. At mid-century, though, as those who aspired to upper-class status moved in, the Hill became known as “Mortgage Hill.”²² Newcomers challenged taken-for-granted associations between congregational affiliation and social status, and the neighborhood natives worried about their class distinctiveness. To them, the newcomers polluted the purity of that place. If all were allowed entrance, they believed,

then their Hill would lose its sacred status. It no longer would be like their church—that is, set apart. Unable to maintain that conflation of congregation and neighborhood, they forsook one for the other. They settled in Palestine and ended up in Pine Forest, moving from a particularly religious to a ubiquitously secular place.

That movement from sacred to profane was not necessarily desacralizing, even if by definition it should have been. The secular club was known by its absent religiosity, by its lack of expressive Methodism, of preacher delivering a sermon, choir sounding the hymns, and laity sharing their concerns. But it was not defined by the absence of the sacred, of powerful things set apart.²³ Rather, the social desire to protect the exclusionary status of their religious place, of an essential difference based on sacred appearance, motivated the migration. The secular project of the Siler City Country Club offered an opportunity to protect the social purity of upper-class white bodies, even if it meant losing their religious particularity. As they left their promised land, those Protestants found another way to ritually perform segregated space using the table manners of the secular club. When the Latina student showed the class “how we do it at the Club,” she did not set place in the image of Palestine, as residents of the Hill had done. Nor did she set place in the image of spiritual inwardness, as Separate Baptists in eighteenth-century Virginia had done before, when they gave up common wares for individual utensils.²⁴ Rather, when she arranged her pencils as forks, knives, and spoons, she performed a place setting, a ritual ordering of differentiated space, in the image of a secular display.

The historical formation of the Siler City Country Club began with the ritual performance of religion. To know that the country club was secular was to recognize it as not a church, and that recognition required a visible classification of the church as religious. Once that relationship was established, the secular could operate as if it were autonomous, as if it were free from religion, if not free of it. Unlike the church, down the hill, the Club was not Methodist property. It transcended a sectarian religious identity, in order to maintain the immanence of its class prestige. The Club also was not an official governmental body. Yet, it functioned as a local apparatus for governmentality and a vehicle for the secular transcendence of religious particularity.²⁵ The secular club operated as if it were an independent body, unfettered by denominational rulings and federal interventions. But as it declared independence, the secular simultaneously conspired with religion to maintain its social patterns of spatial segregation. In the historical movements of religion and secularity traced from Palestine to the Club, southern whites did not displace or replace

religion with the secular. Instead, they added another social list for class ranking, supplementing the First Methodist Episcopal Church, South and the Methodist Protestant Church rolls with the nonreligious membership of the Siler City Country Club. When the Latina student carried the ritual practices of the Club to the classroom, she further complicated that historical relationship and reconfigured its secularizing habits. As with the greasy pig contest, when it looked like the game was over, it began again somewhere else.

Counter to declension narratives of secularization, the secular in this case did not cause religion to lose its social status or significance.²⁶ Upper-class residents were members of both the church *and* the club. Nor was the secular, contrary to diffusion narratives of secularism, merely religion by another name.²⁷ The ritual performances of Methodist affiliation that set the neighborhood apart did, like Hutchison's account of Protestant establishment, die a public death. No one ever remembered the exact cause. One day, once upon a time, the pilgrimages down the Hill just stopped. At some point, people moved. Yet, even after they left the neighborhood behind and stopped the Sunday parades, the members of those Methodist churches, former residents of Palestine, haunted the landscape.²⁸ They persisted in another religious form, not solely in secular likeness. They reconvened as a more private congregational body, meeting within the downtown church of First United Methodist, rather than on the streets that led to its door. Hidden within plain sight, they continued their self-presentation of class privilege. Except now, the building spoke for them, rather than they for the building. The congregation that emerged from the 1940 unification of the First Methodist Episcopal Church, South and the Methodist Protestant Church wielded disproportionate social and cultural capital in the early twenty-first century. As depicted in Table 0.1, the congregation's educational level was well above the national average, and its average annual household income was slightly below the national average. In comparison, both the educational and economic level of the general Siler City community, which included FUMC members, was well below the national average. With regard to education and income, the contrast between FUMC congregants and the rest of the community is striking. FUMC congregants were over four times more likely to graduate from college than members of the community as a whole. Also, they earned on average \$12,000 more per household than other members of the community.²⁹ Economically and educationally privileged, FUMC members banked the social capital necessary for persistent political success.³⁰ These Methodists were not among the wealthiest in the nation, but they were among the elite of their locale. Congregational life concealed that secular advantage, performing

Table 0.1 First United Methodist Church of Siler City Educational and Income Levels, 2003¹

	Less Than High School	High School	Some College	College Graduate	Post Graduate	Annual Household Income
<i>FUMC- Siler City</i>	3%	18%	35%	30%	14%	\$63,929
Siler City Community	31%	34%	24%	7%	3%	\$51,662
U.S. Average	20%	29%	27%	16%	9%	\$64,338

¹Adapted from *Revision Context 2003: First United Methodist Church Siler City, North Carolina* (Rancho Santa Margarita, California: Percept, 2003), 5–6, 10–11. Reprinted with permission from Percept Group, Inc. © 2003.

its collectivity behind church doors rather than in city streets. Their religious affiliation still meant something, even in its more private form. At the end of the long century, the descendants of Palestine still used the church to set themselves apart. Along the way, they added the country club as another site to do the same. And at the turn of a new century, Latino migrants set their own places within those local genealogies of differentiated space.

Argument

Tracing a twentieth-century path of secularization in a southern town, this book argues that Siler City residents participated in performances of religion *and* projects of secularism; their participation revealed social interests as it displayed social status, and the relationship between their performances of religion and their projects of secularism changed over time. Moving roughly chronologically, I suggest that the relationship transitioned from collaborative, to consonant, to contested during the Incorporation (1890s to 1920s), Establishment (1930s to 1960s), and Restructuring (1970s to 2000s), respectively, of social institutions. Those shifting relations describe the dominant mode of public presentation in each historical period, the “mood and motivation” expressed by the upper-class whites that defined and regulated it.³¹

Other residents—upper-class blacks, working-class and middle-class whites and blacks, as well as later arriving Latinos, who composed the bulk of the working class at the end of the twentieth century—also participated in performances of religion and projects of secularism. Their participation, though, was subject to the gaze of a paternalistic minority. From the symbolic vantage point of the Hill, upper-class whites set the discursive terms of civil society by naming and locating the sacred *and* the profane, while simultaneously prescribing the rules of engagement for the ritual interaction of both in public space.

Plotting that path, I reconsider a prevailing assumption that secularism substituted a new form of control for a previous religious one, and that substitution ultimately led to the demise of its predecessor. Max Weber formulated the template for that argument in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), when he set forth the history of capitalistic economies as the sociology of religious ideas. He maintained that “religious tradition” continued to play a significant role in modern capitalism. But it persisted not as religious tradition, but rather as fiscal discipline, what he called “a regulation of the whole of conduct,” which penetrated to “all departments of private and public life.”³² Protestantism was Weber’s historical switchman for that ritual innovation. It carried within itself the ideational mechanism that enabled the industrialist to convert Catholic control of self into capitalist self-control, redirecting it down another track that moved away from the religious and toward the economic. Theorists of secularism later reclassified that endpoint as the secular. For those working out Weber’s thesis, Protestantism’s “emancipation” from Catholicism, as Fessenden phrases it, set the “blueprint” for “secularism’s emancipation from ‘religion’ itself.”³³ That reframed assessment assumes, as Weber did, that Protestantism set in motion a historical process that ultimately led to its own death. It diffused its mechanism of control, the pervasive self-regulation of the priesthood of the believer, into the nooks and crannies of everyday life, as the “Reformation,” Fessenden writes, “generated its presence ‘everywhere,’ not least in secular guise.”³⁴ Each individual was, in that Protestant world, forever after responsible for his or her salvation. No longer could anyone rely on the priest to keep watch over the sacrament. That burden now followed each person wherever they went, as they struggled to keep warm the heart inside their hearts. In little time, though, their spiritual striving transformed itself into a secular exercise, its self-discipline no longer in the service of the church but of the factory.³⁵ Protestantism offered secularism its sword. Upon receiving it, the new science promptly beheaded the religious beast.