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### On The American Religious Experience

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## ESSAY REVIEW

### *On the American Religious Experience*

*Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience: Studies of Traditions and Movements.* Volumes I-III. Edited by CHARLES H. LIPPY and PETER W. WILLIAMS. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988. Vol. I: xvi, 665p. Vol. II: x, 669-1265p. Vol. III: x, 1269-1872p. Bibliographies, index. \$250.)

An encyclopedia on the distinctive configurations of American religion should demonstrate the importance of religious beliefs and actions in creating and sustaining our civilization. In the 1920s the Lynds in their classic sociological portrait of *Middletown* (about Muncie, Indiana) contrasted dynamic progressive forces like business with static, unresponsive churches.<sup>1</sup> Their implicit assumption was that religion, originally a potent force, was losing its authority, even in America's midwestern towns.

By the 1980s scholars could no longer assume that religion's "day" was fast fading. Catholic bishops influenced discussions about nuclear deterrence, economic justice, and abortion. The Moral Majority's combination of evangelical Protestantism, economic conservatism, and anti-Communism brought a sympathetic response from the public and the White House. Jesse Jackson symbolized the continuing role of African-American clergymen-politicians in utilizing the black churches as a power base. The Pentagon consciously utilized Catholic just war doctrine in defending the invasions of Panama and Iraq, and President George Bush met with Billy Graham on the evening the ground war began in Iraq and later told the Southern Baptist convention about his personal prayers. The fusion of religious and patriotic symbols in parades and speeches celebrating the liberation of Kuwait showed the mass appeal of civil religion.

If numbers of people who vote versus those who attend church is an indication, politics is less important in daily life than religious commitment. By many kinds of objective measures—Gallup polls, church property valua-

<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Lynd and Helen M. Lynd, *Middletown, A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York, 1929).

tion, membership, and contributions—America is less secular than in the 1920s. The conclusion seems inescapable: in spite of the common-sense notion that Americans are modern (i.e., rational, bureaucratic, scientific), now as in the past most Americans live in a sacred cosmos and derive their morality from religion. The culture gives prestige to the values derived from Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish sources, but an individual's sacred cosmos is often tangential or even opposed to organized religion. Astrology, witchcraft, encounters with deceased loved ones or extraterrestrial beings, lucky numbers and charms, and vaguely defined mysticisms help millions cope with life. Even though most educational, economic, and political life now operates without an explicit spiritual dimension, there is no visible decline in either religious organizations or personal piety from the end of the seventeenth century until today. Scholars are still perplexed by why America seems to be disproving the Lynds's assumption that modernization means a decline in religion. This encyclopedia presents the data for a new understanding of the history and future of religion in North America.

Pennsylvania illustrates what is distinctive in the American religious experience. Indeed, Penn's colony early helped establish the norm for attitudes and laws favoring the separation of church and state, equal justice, pluralism and toleration, lay control, and voluntary contributions to religious institutions. America's moral campaigns for temperance, peace, and equal rights for women, blacks, and Native Americans originated in Pennsylvania's churches. Presbyterians and Baptists in the early nineteenth century had their headquarters in Philadelphia. Here Roman Catholics experienced freedom to worship, the turmoil of the trustee controversy and nativism, and the accomplishments of the first autocratic bricks-and-mortar bishop, Francis Kenrick (his successor became the first American male saint). The state incorporated the first independent black churches, and Bethel served as "mother" for a new denomination. Pennsylvania played a crucial role in the history of Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, and German Reformed churches. Like the Rappites, Moravians, and inhabitants of Ephrata, German, Swiss, and Dutch Antebaptists who settled in Lancaster County created a distinctive way of life. Schisms, the Great Awakenings, revivalism, the social gospel, romanticism (the Mercersburg movement), the liturgical revival, liberalism, fundamentalism—all had a Pennsylvania manifestation, and all appear in this encyclopedia. Unfortunately, as too often occurs in the writing of American history, information about the Middle colonies is buried in essays on other subjects. Still, Pennsylvania's history illustrates the uniqueness of American religion.

This first comprehensive encyclopedia of religion in America shows that the older study of American church history has expanded its focus while moving from the divinity schools to departments of American studies, literature, history, sociology, and psychology. A review provides an opportunity

to evaluate a major new reference source and also to assess the present state of research on religious life from the Indians to Jerry Falwell.

Unlike most encyclopedias, the editors commissioned a limited number (105) of essays on important topics rather than thousands of short entries presented in alphabetical order. The essays are substantially longer than the average article in the *PMHB*, and each essay contains footnotes of quotations and a bibliography. This format gives contributors space to develop themes of considerable complexity, and it also allows some variety in style. One disadvantage is that each author's attempt to make his/her essay intelligible creates an overlapping of subjects, particularly in discussions of individuals in which information offered repeats material in the other essays. A second drawback is the confusing division of related knowledge in separate sections labeled Approaches, Background, Movements, Traditions, Liturgy, Social Order, and Dissemination. The topics show how diffuse in both subject and methodology religious studies has become. The editors concluded that the study of America alone cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of Roman Catholicism or Puritanism, so they secured special treatments of the "heritage" of different denominations. This works well in the discussions of John Wesley for the Methodists and the Reformed movement for Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Dutch and German Reformed, but it becomes too general when the "Roman Catholic Heritage" summarizes church tradition from Augustine to liberation theology.

"America" for these volumes extends from Mexico to Canada, and Baptists share space with Buddhism, Shintoism, and a variety of new religious movements. In addition to denominational histories, summaries of religious thought at specific times, and discussions of the impact of religion on society and politics in various periods, there are chapters on architecture, the religious press, pastoral counseling and psychology, and medical ethics. The editors determined that three regions deserve special treatment: seventeenth-century New England, the South, and California. New England and the South are clearly distinct, but California's claim rests on an Indian-Spanish heritage and exotic cults better treated in separate topical essays. There is also a series of "religion and" essays: religion and art, science, literature, architecture, film, and popular culture.

The best way to use these volumes is to read an individual essay straight through. There is no quicker way for an advanced undergraduate, graduate student, or educated layperson to learn what modern scholars have concluded about such varied matters as the nature of Christian Science, the geography of denominations, and the contrasts between fundamentalists and pentecostals. To be sure, beginners would do better to use a regular reference work, for many articles presume background. Although one could quarrel with the allotment of space given particular groups (i.e., Baptists and Roman Catholics

receive too little space here, considering their numbers and importance), the editors and authors have succeeded in providing comprehensive and fair treatment of a bewildering variety of denominations, cults, and movements.

The greatest weakness is in the index. There are no biographies *per se*, but in many sections there are discussions of significant individuals. "Jonathan Edwards," for example, is mentioned forty-two times, and "Martin Luther King" twenty-four. Because there are no subheadings or italicized main entries under their names, a person seeking Edwards's view of eschatology or King's attitude on the war in Vietnam might have to look in a dozen places for the relevant information. Moreover, the subjects indexed are idiosyncratic. "Shamanism" has eleven references, but other key items—evil, guilt, grace, virgin birth, atonement, and hell—are not indexed. "Sin" and "heaven" have only two entries, "salvation" only four. Neither Jesus nor the Holy Spirit are listed, but the recent "Jesus movement" has eight entries. There are as many mentions of various Trinity churches as to the "Trinity." If the index is taken as a guide to significance, neither religious festivals like Christmas, Easter, and Yom Kippur nor Christian doctrines had much significance in American religious life.

At issue is whether the index is just inadequate or whether in their attempt to be fair to pluralism, the editors forgot the core subject. There is no easy answer to this issue, not only because of the variety of subjects and authors, but also because of the problematic quality built into the title: "religious experience." By concentrating upon traditions and movements, the encyclopedia neglects the individual's religious experiences. Virtually all Americans who claimed religious experience—whether Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim—have referred to God. What are scholars to do with this claim? If they accept it at face value, their work becomes, like much traditional church history, an apologia, generally normative for one kind of experience, because it is very difficult to accept the enormous variety of what God is alleged to have revealed to William Penn, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, and Billy Graham—unless the transcendent is infinitely changeable. Yet, if scholars deny or ignore the individual's experience or reduce it to a cultural setting, they cannot do justice to the truth claims that motivate individuals to participate in the institutions. The response of most of the essayists is to pretend that the problem does not exist, to reduce religion to a cultural artifact, and to seek academic respectability. The authors assume but neglect the commonality's vaguely defined "religious experience" while concentrating on those expressions of religion susceptible to historical, sociological, and literary analysis—namely, the institutions (churches, synagogues), literary remains (sermons, hymns, theology, novels, autobiographies), and reform movements.

The essays show that unlike church history, which was often confessional, the academic study of religion has failed to develop a methodology of its own and is therefore dependent upon the strengths or weaknesses of other disciplines. Intellectual and institutional history remain the dominant approaches, but in dealing with modern materials, scholars factor in sociology, anthropology, and psychology. One expects disunity in a college curriculum divided among different departments. Here the anarchy is imposed by the discipline's inability, or unwillingness, to decide what is and is not "religious" and how the methods of social sciences in the treatment of religious movements and traditions distort as well as illuminate the subject.

The encyclopedia shows the weaknesses in American religious studies. A concentration on public religions means that a disproportionate role is played by educated males who have monopolized power in the churches and controlled the publications. The authors included women in the essays and one article is titled "Women and Religion," but the impression left is that many monographs are needed before we will have enough knowledge to understand successfully the importance of women to American religion. The same, but to a lesser extent, is true of African-Americans. The discussion of Native Americans devotes most attention to earlier erroneous accounts and warns scholars how to avoid similar errors.

Of the practices of colonial churches, we know an immense amount. Of the nineteenth-century churches, we lack fundamental information on the laity: what they believed, how much Bible or theology they knew, who gave money, on what occasions they attended. Did the local church create a community by which poor and middle-class families coped with industrialization, urbanization, and depression? Overall, there is insufficient regard paid to class, economics, children, and death. Statistics kept by churches are notoriously unreliable, but the essays leave the impression that their authors use computers only for word processing. Atheism, agnosticism, and various forms of unbelief are slighted, except in the article on science and religion, and a general discussion of the usefulness of secularization, modernization, or other conceptual devices to treat the evolution of religion is needed.

Because the liabilities are largely symptomatic of the field, this encyclopedia is extraordinarily valuable as a definition of the state of the art. The essays on denominations, theology, and politics show the results of years of research and, by their lacunae, where more work is needed. The treatments of art, film, literature, and science illustrate the pervasiveness of religion in the creation of our civilization. An understanding of the roles of American religion is essential to understand reform movements from the evolution of the New England colonies and Pennsylvania to progressivism and civil rights. Utopianism, pro- and antislavery thought, the adjustments of blacks to slavery and freedom, the peace movement, Native Americans' culture

before and after European settlement, romanticism, and the Enlightenment can be divorced from a religious context only at a cost of intelligibility. Similarly, there were religious dimensions to writers like Emerson and Hawthorne, scientists like William James and Louis Agassiz, and popular cultural myths like the self-made man and republican mother. The nation has pictured itself as a new Israel, a chosen people, a Christian and then a Judeo-Christian republic. The American way of life merges deep personal piety and a new secular order. In politics, the nation went *e pluribus unum*; in religion, it began as many and went to more. The editors and authors of these volumes have demonstrated that, like politics and economics, religion is a subject of enormous complexity we must study in order to understand past and present American peoples.

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