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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### RELIGION IN AMERICA

"The religious history of the American people [is] one of the grandest epics in the history of mankind. The stage is continental in size, and the cast is produced by the largest trans-oceanic migration and the most rapid continental dispersion of people the world has ever seen."

As Sydney E. Ahlstrom proceeds to show in his two-volume **A Religious History of the American People** (Yale, 1972, cloth; Doubleday, 1975, paper), a traveler making his way from Boston to the Carolinas as early as 1700 would have encountered Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Quakers; Dutch, German, and French Reformed; Swedish, Finnish, and German Lutherans; Mennonites and radical Pietists; Anglicans and Roman Catholics; some Jews; and a few Rosicrucians.

The distinctive patterns of American religion were shaped, in part, by the New World's distance from Europe, Ahlstrom notes. The Puritans transferred their faith in Britain as an "Elect Nation" to the settlements they founded in New England. By 1893, their descendants, including Congregationalist Josiah Strong, were championing the United States as a new Rome, destined to "Anglo-Saxonize" the world. New England Calvinism, Ahlstrom believes, gave American religion a tone, an establishment, and a moral consensus, and he laments its long decline as a dominant cultural force.

If Ahlstrom overstates the pre-eminence of New England Puritanism, Martin E. Marty's **Righteous Empire** (Dial, 1970, cloth; Harper, 1977,

paper) constitutes a partial antidote.

In recounting the Protestant quest for a "kingdom of God" in America, Marty frequently ventures beyond New England to the "overlooked Protestants." He depicts the unease with which Anglo-Saxons sometimes viewed the ethnic Protestants further south. Many were of two minds about the growing number of black Christians: "It was feared that [blacks] would get ideas of freedom if they read about Moses leading God's people out of slavery in Egypt." But others saw religion as a valuable tool of the slave-holder: "The Gospel," wrote one Northern clergyman in 1836, "teaches [the slave] obedience to God, and faithfulness to the interests of his earthly master."

Still, Marty's focus is "mainline" Protestantism. The evangelical strain in American Protestantism has other chroniclers. In **Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform** (Univ. of Chicago, 1978, cloth; 1980, paper), William G. McLoughlin identifies successive periods of religious "awakening" in America, beginning with the "Puritan revitalization" (1610-40), followed by the "First Great Awakening" (1730-60), and concluding with what he believes to be a "Fourth Great Awakening" that began in 1960. Now as before, he writes, Americans "are in a difficult period of reorientation, seeking an understanding of who we are, how we relate to the rest of the universe."

Evangelicals have often channeled fervor into "good works," as Timothy Smith demonstrates in **Revivalism and Social Reform** (Abingdon,

1957; Johns Hopkins, rev. ed., 1980, paper only). From its pre-Civil War emphasis on personal spirituality and public morality (e.g., temperance, abolition), revivalism evolved into "a search for the causes of human suffering and a campaign to reconstruct social and economic relations upon a Christian pattern."

By the end of the 19th century, according to Henry May, in **Protestant Churches and Industrial America** (Harper, 1949; Octagon, 1963), some radical Christians, in the name of the "Social Gospel," were calling for paper money and state ownership of communications industries.

Richard Quebedeaux brings the story of **The Worldly Evangelicals** (Harper, 1980, paper) up to date. In this compact survey, he takes in the current evangelical scene from Billy Graham to the left-wing People's Christian Coalition to sex manuals for the born again.

George Marsden's long-awaited **Fundamentalism and American Culture 1870-1925** (Oxford, 1980) has been deservedly praised as a careful unraveling of the tangled roots of a movement that gave shape to much of 20th-century evangelicalism. Marsden punctures the conventional wisdom. He argues, for example, that in the debates of the 1920s over evolution, the Fundamentalists were not "anti-science." Rather, Marsden shows, they were mistakenly "judging the standards of the later scientific revolution by the standards of the first—the revolution of Bacon and Newton. In their view, science depended on fact and demonstration. Darwinism, so far as they could see, was based on neither."

Wilson Carey McWilliams's **The Idea of Fraternity in America** (Univ. of Calif., 1973, cloth & paper), though sometimes prolix, remains

the finest account of a still-raging conflict between the Protestant ideal of a *covenant* ("the fraternity of the Elect," unwaveringly committed to specified values and goals) and the Lockean notion of *contract* (an agreement to form a political society). The American predilection for a politics of "interest-balancing," McWilliams says, has always clashed with Reformation religion's notion of a substantive "common good" that does not admit of compromise.

Jews and Catholics have typically shunned the Protestant idea of covenant, largely because it has usually been defined so as to exclude Jews and Catholics. Protestant nativism, a recurring phenomenon in American religious history, is the subject of Ray Billington's **The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860** (Macmillan, 1938; Times Books, 1976, paper).

Billington traces periodic flare-ups of "No Popery" sentiment back to Tudor England. The Puritans of Massachusetts and the Anglicans of Virginia, he notes, "had seen the constant plot and counter-plot of the reigns of Elizabeth and James I when Catholic forces threatened to invade their land." Cut off from the mother country, American Protestants were largely unaffected by the "liberal currents" that gradually nurtured a spirit of toleration in the Old World.

There is a sore need for a new general history of Catholicism in America. John Tracy Ellis's standard **American Catholicism** (Univ. of Chicago, 1956; 2nd ed., 1969, cloth & paper) has certain virtues, not the least of them its reminder that the Catholics were "here first." (Some 35,000 Catholic Indians, converted by Spanish missionaries, were living in New Mexico as the Puritan Plymouth Colony was getting underway.) But Ellis's book is too heavily

devoted to institutional history and hierarchical biography. Thomas McAvoy's **A History of the Catholic Church in the United States** (Univ. of Notre Dame, 1969) is a good supplement but quite dated.

A highly regarded interpretive survey of changes in the American Catholic church since Vatican II is David O'Brien's **The Renewal of American Catholicism** (Oxford, 1972, cloth; Paulist, 1974, paper). For an insider's account of the council itself, one cannot improve on the pseudonymous Xavier Rynne's wry, sometimes acid **Letters from Vatican City** (Farrar, 1963); **The Second Session** (Farrar, 1964); **The Third Session** (Farrar, 1965); and **The Fourth Session** (Farrar, 1966). Many of these letters originally appeared in *The New Yorker*.

The best guides to Catholic sensibilities and political tendencies are Andrew M. Greeley's **The American Catholic: A Social Portrait** (Basic, 1977, cloth; 1978, paper) and Mary Hanna's **Catholics and American Politics** (Harvard, 1979). Greeley begins with several "givens": that American Catholics are predominantly lower-middle-class, blue-collar workers; that they are politically conservative; that Catholic priests are unhappy in their vocations; that Catholic support for parochial schools is waning. "Every one of the above propositions," he states, "is demonstrably false."

The most exciting new studies of U.S. Catholics have been social histories of ethnic groups for whom religious faith has been an inducement to cultural cohesion. Representative of this genre are Victor Greene's **For God and Country: The Rise of Polish and Lithuanian Consciousness in America, 1860-1910** (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1975) and

Humbert S. Nelli's **The Italians in Chicago 1880-1930** (Oxford, 1970; 1973, cloth & paper).

Arguably the best single social history of ethnic religiosity is Irving Howe's stirring story of American Judaism, **World of Our Fathers** (Harcourt, 1976, cloth; Simon & Schuster, 1977, paper). The first recorded arrival of Jews in what is now the United States occurred in September 1654 when a French ship, the *St. Charles*, sailed into New York harbor with 23 Jewish refugees from South America. By 1780, some 3,000 Jews were living in the 13 colonies.

Howe's account starts with the massive influx of (primarily) East European Jews beginning in the 1880s. "Once past initial barriers," Howe writes, "the Jews were allowed an entry into social and economic life on terms more favorable than any they had dreamed of. [All that America] asked was that the Jews surrender their collective self."

Two important anthologies provide glimpses of Jewish life in the United States from the end of World War II (where Howe leaves off) up through the 1960s. **The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group** (Free Press, 1958; Greenwood, 1977), edited by Marshall Sklare, dispels the myth of American Jewry as a homogeneous community. Cleavages persist, alone or in combination: by ethnic origin (Spain and Portugal, Germany, Eastern Europe, the Middle East), occupational status (professional, entrepreneurial, working class) and religious identification (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform).

**The Ghetto and Beyond** (Random, 1969), edited by Peter Rose, includes essays on the Jewish mother, anti-Semitism, Jewish political radicalism, the Jewish novelist, and other themes by such prominent writers as

Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset, Philip Roth, and Calvin Trillin.

Several basic reference books on American religion are published annually. **The American Jewish Year Book** (American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Publication Society of America) contains current information on worldwide Jewish populations, civic organizations, and specialized periodicals, as well as reflective essays on such topics as "Jewish Survival: The Demographic Factors" and "Soviet Jewry since the Death of Stalin." The yearbook brims with statistical facts. One learns, for example, that there are three times as many Jews in Muscatine, Iowa (100), as there are in all of China.

Less ambitious is the **Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches** (Abingdon), produced by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. The volume includes membership and financial data for some 219 religious bodies.

J. Gordon Melton's two-volume **Encyclopedia of American Religions** (McGrath, 1978) is an indispensable guide to 1,200 religious groups, ranging from Southern Baptists to the Satanic Church in America. A useful adjunct is Edwin S. Gausted's **Historical Atlas of Religion in America** (Harper, 1962; rev. ed., 1976). Gausted's concise, fact-filled commentary weaves together hundreds of maps and charts.

George Gallup, Jr. and David Poling's **The Search for America's Faith** (Abingdon, 1980) presents an analysis of opinion polls conducted by the authors as they sought to determine

whether Americans' apprehensions about the state of organized religion "are a prelude to spiritual disaster or the final darkness before the dawn of a sparkling new day." Gallup and Poling are optimistic. They detect strong satisfaction among Americans with their particular religious preference (self-esteem is strongest among the rapidly growing Mormons) and a surge toward "orthodoxy" (as opposed to fringe cults).

Many books appeared during the 1960s and '70s on the growth of non-Judeo-Christian religions (and "para-religions") in the United States. A handful of these are works of real distinction. Among them: Robert Ellwood's **Alternative Altars: Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America** (Univ. of Chicago, 1979). In this critical survey, Ellwood discerns an impulse toward Eastern spirituality since the days of Thoreau and Emerson.

A more straightforward overview of new religious and quasi-religious movements in the United States—from the Hare Krishnas to the Human Potential Movement—is contained in **The New Religious Consciousness** (Univ. of Calif., 1976, cloth & paper), edited by Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah.

If any general impression emerges from all of these books, it is of an American religious melting pot whose elements refuse to melt. As historian Philip Schaff noted in 1854, the United States, if nothing else, offers "a motley sampler of all church history."

—John A. Coleman, S. J.

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