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## Perspectives on American Religion and Culture

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Bernard Aspinwall

A few weeks before Peter W. Williams, ed., *Perspectives on American Religion and Culture*, (Blackwells, Oxford 1999) arrived, I met a Chinese-American professor whose dress, accent and confidence suggested a long-established American family. In fact she was of Chinese-Vietnamese parents, brought up in Cambodia and had spent two years as a boat refugee. Sponsored by a Catholic agency at eight without any English, she subsequently gained a doctorate from the finest state university in California and still retains a traditional faith. She epitomises the thrust of this collection: America welcomes, liberates and enables her to negotiate her own adjustments.

The book has twenty seven essays around seven themes ranging across the nation, centuries and denominations. Five essays each discuss intellectuals and the growing field of material culture. Four cover pluralism while three each examine the colonial period, transitions, gender, race and ethnicity. Within those categories Mormons, Positivism, Native Americans, food, drink and serpent handling have one each, Judaism two and the largest single body, Roman Catholicism, three. Well-worn paths bypassed include spiritualism, abolitionism and prohibitionism: sport, movies, homosexuality and recent immigrant faiths are largely absent. Interestingly, a volume devoted to diversity has only two academics come from west of the Mississippi and no obvious 'new' immigrant essayist.

The writers underestimate Scottish influence from Witherspoon to Common Sense philosophy in transforming Puritanism; in Edward Caird promoting the Religion of Humanity; or in the fear of atheism and anarchy. But these are pedantic points about a lively set of essays and succinct bibliographies. Professor Williams and his friends deserve our thanks for a collection which reflects the vibrant nature of American religious studies, like the dynamic faith and joy of the nation itself. It will be valuable to undergraduate and

researcher alike.

It shows a shift from old orthodoxies to new, more exciting, diverse views of immigrant spiritual experience is complete. Elites previously asserted moral superiority. whether ethical culturalist, revivalist, Episcopalian, Catholic conservative or even women. Popular revulsion against certain stereotyped immigrants overcame earlier tolerance: Crevecoeur's dream foundered on Nativism. Laurie Maffley-Kipp shows Christians united in opposition to Chinese migrants as Carolyn Haynes's women endorsed social and racial superiority.

That day is done.

Group hagiography or celebration likewise have moved on to more critical assessment. Even Sydney Ahlstrom's magisterial study has succumbed to more complex interpretations. If George Marsden refreshed fundamentalist study, Jay P. Dolan and the Cushwa Center, showed the varied Catholic experience: like 'the Fighting Irish' themselves Catholicism is rich and diverse. Stephen J. Stein argues alternative lifestyles or minorities gave others greater confidence in their choices. The architecture of revivalism according to Jeanne Kilde produced new ideas of faith in the public arena, highlighted the individual preacher for good or ill and strengthened faith through public emotion. Patriotism united faiths in World Wars and Cold- War while postwar affluence saw increasing intermarriage between Catholics and Protestants, Christians and Jews. Anne C Rose argues upward mobility left traditional theologies and ethnic links behind. And yet identity persisted within a religious framework. Lyman Beecher's eleven children all abandoned his Calvinism; Jewish males often married Christian wives; only one daughter of publisher Henry Carey's large family married a Catholic while his grandson was H. C. Lea, historian of the Inquisition. If Washington Gladden gloried in an inter-racial social gospel, Congregationalists sustained a segregated system. The extreme case of Cornelia Connelly and her husband exemplifies each generation's search. in religious individualism: the consumer found meaning in the marketplace of competing faiths.

Each generation further distanced from Europe and enjoying higher standards, found self denial less resonant. They celebrated the triumph of American pluralism rather than that of a particular sect or denomination: E Pluribus Unum. Each praised the Lord and nation in its peculiar mode of expression. Portable expressions of faith, medals and books, spawned literary and artistic enterprises. More elaborate buildings made a statement of a group and its faith. In Beth Wenger's fascinating essay, the few interwar Jewish activists improved recruitment through more synagogue facilities and strengthened group identity through dynamic Zionism.

The New Deal recognised Jewish and Catholic needs, aspirations and permanent voting power. Like Mary Jo Weaver and Paula Kane's Catholics they moved from victimhood to fuller acceptance. Catholic parishes as Robert Orsi showed earlier provided witness to ethnic values and space for self-expression. Neo-Thomistic clergy and deferential laity reinforced faith in devotional and mutual aid organisations. But perhaps their decline owed less to 'discernment' and more to religion as lifestyle. The persistence of folk art, contrary to Leonard N. Primiano, in my limited experience, seems more generational: it flourishes in Florida retirement zones rather than in Louisville or Chicago. And was 'ghetto Catholicism' anything but a process of adjustment? Could anyone remain isolated in American culture? Married Catholic clergy might solve some problems, but raise divorce and child care issues. And homosexual clergy? As a venerable Dominican, rector of a Scottish university, said to me years ago 'We have had homosexual clergy for 2,000 years'. It is like the contemporary issue of homosexuals in the military. Social improvement meant adjustment and adaptation. Each group responded gradually and sometimes imaginatively to social change. But every vision from Puritanism, Mormonism to Catholicism adjusted in a similar way to marketing realities. Would their faith play in Peoria? For as Philip L. Barlow on Mormons and Russell E. Richey on Methodism show, religion is in permanent transition. Every visit to America is to a new country. On each occasion like Montalembert's visits to England, it is 'a bath of life'.

By the 1990s later arrivals had similarly adjusted and shared in a common progression. Religious divisions are more horizontal than vertical: conservatives and liberals have far more in common across than within denominations. In religion as elsewhere in America the consumer is king although in some areas women

priests, homosexuality and abortion remain unresolved, divisive issues.

As one Progressive academic of the early twentieth century wrote 'Can a nation which has been through Calvinism ever be truly democratic?' The final answer is still awaited.

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