

**American Religion:  
A review Article of the Series Religion in American Life**  
By Luke L. Keefer, Jr.\*

Edwin S. Gaustad, *Church and State in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 157 pages.

Hasia R. Diner, *Jesus in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 158 pages.

Albert J. Raboteau, *African-American Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 142 pages.

Claudia Lauper Bushman and Richard Lyman Bushman, *Mormons in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 142 pages.

The four books are part of a 17 volume set on Religion in American Life edited by Yale University religious historians Jon Butler and Harry S. Stout. All these books are surveys of various strands of American religious history from 1500 to the present. The editors share the conviction that it is impossible to understand American society, its politics and its culture, without understanding the central role religion - in all its diversity - has played in the development of the United States (see preface in each volume).

Three books in this series have previously been reviewed in the *Ashland Theological Journal*. In the 2001 journal Dr. Dale Stoffer reviewed Jon Butler's *Religion in Colonial America* (pp. 143-144) and Stephan J. Stein's *Alternative American Religions* (pp. 155-156). The following year Dr. JoAnn Watson reviewed Ann Braude's *Women and American Religion* (pp. 153-154). The series includes two more period histories: *Religion in Nineteenth Century America* by Grant Wacker and *Religion in Twentieth Century America* by Randall Balmer. Volumes on particular religious groups include: Gurinder Singh Mann, Paul David Numrich and Raymond B. William's *Buddhists, Hindus and*

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*Sikhs in America*; James T. Fisher's *Catholics in America*; Fredrick Denny's *Muslims in America*; John H. Erickson's *Orthodox Christians in America*; Mark Noll's *Protestants in America*; and Joel W. Martin's *Native American Religion*. Rounding out the set are *Immigration and American Religion* by Jenna Weissman Joselit and *A Biographical Supplement and Series Index* prepared by Darryl Hart and Ann Henderson Hart.

All the books are superbly written and edited. The content, through uniformly kept to about 150 pages, is excellent in academic import, clearly organized according to chronological periods, insightful in raising crucial themes and questions, and kept interesting through stories and pictures. They are most serviceable to those who seek their first introduction to the subjects involved, but even those who are relatively well informed will find much to expand their understanding. All the volumes are published in hard bound colorful covers, which if displayed properly, would pique the interest of the casual reader. All North American libraries ought to contain the set, but it also would be an appropriate source in homes, pastors' studies, and church libraries.

In *Church and State in America*, readers profit from the long career of Edwin Gaustad's teaching and writing on American Religious history. He demonstrates throughout the tension between the avowed civil philosophy of the "separation of church and state" and the actual interweaving of the two in the hearts and minds of many citizens of the United States. And, contrary to appearances, the recent era shows no abatement of the dilemma. He notes, "Indeed, there have been more cases interpreting the First Amendment in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in all earlier periods of American History combined" (p. 7).

Since the subject is so broad, Gaustad choose to limit the scope by using Supreme Court cases throughout American history as a way to illustrate the issues of Church and State. After two chapters on the European background to and the American experiment in representative democracy, he launches reviews of the Supreme Court cases in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among the interesting cases from the 1800's were the ones involving colleges founded by churches and the issue of polygamy among the Mormons. With the disestablishment of the churches in New England, some argued that a consistent application of the law would force all church-supported colleges to be turned over to state control. In *Dartmouth College v. Woodward* (1819), Daniel Webster-an alumnus of Dartmouth - took the case to the Supreme Court and won. Colleges founded and supported by churches would not come under state ownership and control (pp. 53-54). The crucial issue in polygamy was whether

an individual could claim religious exemption from civil codes of behavior (the US Congress had outlawed polygamy in all states and territories in 1862). The court ruled that while the First Amendment did not allow government to regulate belief, it could punish those who broke the laws governing public behavior. Otherwise, every citizen would "become a law unto himself" (p.61).

Gaustad's case examples from the 20<sup>th</sup> century are quite interesting - religious tests for federal officials, conscientious objector to war status for atheists, municipal display of Christmas nativity scenes, and the tax-exempt status of churches. More interesting, however, are his observations of the changes in American society that have prompted numerous court cases based upon First Amendment issues (pp. 65-66). He mentions two truisms in passing. First, "When the decisions of the nine justices fail to be unanimous, it is a good guess that the American public has also had trouble reaching a consensus" (p. 66). And, second, "Five-to-four decisions are notoriously slippery; that is, they do not establish solid precedents upon which to build" (p. 75). He notes that many such split decisions get overturned by later Courts, when either the Court composition or the public opinion changes.

Many readers would be highly interested in the cases in chapters 5-7 regarding public and private schools and the limits of religious toleration before the law. Many issues are of contemporary interest: religious instruction in school (the Court says no for grades K-12 but is less concerned about college students), the teaching of evolution, school prayer, government money for private schools, the Jehovah Witnesses' ban against blood transfusions, Amish resistance to high school education, and the use of peyote in religious ritual among some Native American tribes, to name a few examples.

Gaustad concludes by predicting that Church/State tensions will occupy the Supreme Court and the American public far into the future. "However," he states, "the road would be far bumpier - as it is over so much of the rest of the world - if the resort to law were replaced by a resort to arms" (p.148).

*Jews in American* by Hasia Diner is as fine an introduction as one can find on the subject. She has an excellent grasp of the various historical periods from 1650's to the present, with the possible exception of the colonial era, where her expertise is not as vast. Yet, even here, the treatment is adequate, and, it must be admitted the historical sources are not as plentiful as they are for subsequent periods. She makes up for this by making connections with the Jewish experience in Europe, so the reader can understand the situation Jews faced in the new world.

She does excel in the social history of the Jewish people in America and makes the important connections between that history and the religious

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developments in the Jewish community. She is strong in the subject of immigration, when it occurred, points of origin in the old world, places of settlement in America, and what Jews brought with them in religious and cultural perspectives. She makes the important point that, while Jewish people were not part of the American mainstream until after WW II, they still felt things in America were better than any other country on earth.

That is an amazing declaration given the difficult history many Jews experienced in America. The first group of 23 Jews who landed in the Dutch City of New Amsterdam (now New York City) in 1654 were pointedly informed by Peter Stuyvesant and an official of the Dutch Reformed Church that they were not welcomed there (pp. 14-15). They fared no better in Puritan New England, where they were forbidden to live in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century and were accused by the Puritan pulpit of the guilt of Christ's blood (p. 22). They would find through the centuries restrictions to college education and admission to the professions. They occasionally suffered mob violence, even lynching (pp. 76-77), and threats from the KKK and other anti-Semitic groups. More difficult, perhaps, has been the insinuations of people like Henry Ford in his publication of the forgery know as "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" (p.89), for such charges makes hate and suspicion respectable.

In general, she traces the developments of the Jewish mind toward American society from isolation, to the desire for acceptance, and ultimately to acculturation within the social mainstream. What is gained in cultural acceptance, however, comes with a price. Religious life becomes either more difficult or more attenuated, best seen perhaps in recent statistics on intermarriage with non-Jews (estimates vary between 35-50 % of all present Jews who marry in America - p. 138). The tension of accommodation to American culture has given rise to branches in Judaism, such as Conservative Judaism, Reform Judaism, and Reconstructuralist Judaism, each moving further from Orthodox Judaism.

The book gives good insights into Jewish stances on politics. During the Civil War they sided with Lincoln and the Republicans because of their abhorance of slavery, rooted in Old Testament history. In the twentieth century they have been predominately Democratic due to their support for labor unions and other social causes, especially on measures to overcome racism. Here the author deals with a delicate and painful topic, and one senses the anguish of the Jewish community concerning it. During the civil rights movements of the 1960's the Jews in America were strong supporters of the Martin Luther King, Jr. and participated in marches, demonstrations, and legal efforts to end

discrimination. But more recently, events in Israel have led to outspoken criticism of Jewish treatment of Arabs by several African-American spokesmen. The passionate invective by Louis Farrakhan is particularly irksome. To be switched from the category of "partner" to "the enemy" by leading voices in the black community is both hurtful and fearful. It raises the specter of the past when passionate negative rhetoric was generally the doorway to violence against Jews.

Both the internal tensions of acculturation and the external threats of anti-Semitism have led to Jewish responses in recent decades to clarify their identity and stability. Diner notes renewed emphasis upon Jewish education for children and youth and the decisions of rabbis to encourage gentile marriage partners to convert to Judaism. There is a felt need for the Ante-Defamation League, and some even support the Jewish Defense League. Since the 1960's Jews have become interested in Holocaust studies and supported the establishment of Holocaust museums that might help to better educate the public. There is a strong sentiment of Zionism, which many outsiders do not understand. Israel is a psychological and religious necessity, for Jews are determined to never again be in a situation where they can not count on a country for refuge in a time of extreme political distress.

Professor Diner's account is kept colorful through judicious illustrations and stories. Two stand out in particular. First, she includes George Washington's letter to the leaders of the Newport, R.I. synagogue in 1790 (pp. 28-25). With obvious goodwill to the Jews of this new republic, and with high (exaggerated?) regard for the import of the Constitution, he wrote in part:

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it was by the indulgence of one clan of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, inquiring it on all occasions their effectual support.

If only it were this easy, surly subsequent history would be different!

Then, she tells the story of Emma Lazarus and her connection to the Statue of Liberty (pp. 51-52). She was the winner of the poetry contest sponsored as a way to help pay for the pedestal of "miss liberty." She died before the statue was unveiled, and it was twenty years before her poem was placed inside the pedestal, and another thirty years until it was fastened outside the pedestal where all can now read her famous lines:

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Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to break free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

These lines are appropriate for Jews who found something of a haven of sanctuary in the United States, but ironic in that both Jews and other minorities know how elusive this promise is.

There is no question that Dr. Diner identified positively with her people, their problems, and their accomplishments. However, she does so with appropriate scholarly objectivity. Her personal perspective adds human warmth to the story without detracting from its historical credibility.

It is easy to be effusive about Albert J. Raboteau's *African-American Religion*. For he too, gives his account with passion and conviction, while he lets the facts speak for themselves. Again, if one wants one good introduction to the subject, it would be difficult to find a better source than this volume.

I would highlight several strengths of the book. First his chronological periods help one determine the key points of development in African American history and religion: the colonial period and the origin of African slavery in the United States, the promise of the Revolutionary War and the disappointment of the Constitution, repressed but growing Christianity among blacks in the antebellum period, the freedom gained by the Civil War and its subsequent losses in the reconstruction era, the northern migration of African-Americans in the 1920s, the Civil Rights campaign and its advancements in rights and identities, and the diverse scene in the present period.

To this skeleton of history one can connect the flesh of the emerging black religious experience. At first, slaves worshipped in white churches where they were second-class participants. While free blacks were establishing independent African-American churches in the North, slave worship had to be mostly in secret in the South. Following the Civil War black denominations began to thrive also in the South, and with the exception of the Pentecostal Churches, the major black denominations all were flourishing before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Large urban churches were the result of the migrations North and West, with extensive programs to minister to physical needs as well as spiritual ones. He concludes that the African-American churches are still vital to the black community, but the religious scene today is more diverse than it was in the past (pp. 131-132).

A second strength of the book is the large list of people who have figured prominently in various stages of these religious and social developments. Just as few of the major players include names like Andrew Bryan, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, Henry Highland Garnet, Lott Carey, Jarena Lee, Harriet Tubman, W.E.B. DuBois, Sojourner Truth, Henry McNeal Turner, Daniel Alexander Payne, Ida B. Wells, Marcus Garvey, William J. Seymour, Charles H. Mason, Father Divine, Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, Louis Farrakhan, Katie Cannon, Delores Williams, and Jacquelyn Grant. Brief descriptions of their lives and contributions, among a host of other names, convince the reader of the necessity to carry research further by consulting biographies of selected figures and reading in the treatises they wrote.

A third feature of the book is its attention to what makes black Christianity different from the dominant white practice of faith. He suggests several aspects. It is more spirit-focused, relying on its African religious heritage. Religion must be felt, which makes preaching, praying, and singing more emotion-laden than typical white worship. Again, the African-American churches, as a matter of course, are politically engaged and socially committed. They have had to care for people's needs in a society where resources are not equally available to all. And, lastly, a case could be made that the black churches play a more crucial role in the formation of identity and the creation of meaning for its people than the white churches do for theirs. The difference is due to the fact that African-American religion is counter-cultural while white religion is not.

A fourth strength is the author's posing the question of "theodicy" that most troubles black consciousness in America: why did God allow slavery? He does not try to give it a philosophical answer. Instead, he gives examples of ways African-Americans have responded to that question. For some, slavery nullifies any truth claims of Christianity. Black Christians, on the other hand, have sometimes argued that God allowed slavery as a means of bringing Christianity to Africa. This position gave strong motivation for black missionary work in Africa. Before the Civil War and again in the Civil Rights era, many preached that God allowed blacks to be enslaved so as to prick the conscience of white Christians and bring them to repentance for their deeds. Another option strongly supported a positive African-consciousness. They compared themselves to the Israelites of the Old Testament, who, as God's elect, were permitted to be enslaved in Egypt, so that the miracle of Exodus could make them a light to all nations regarding God's love, grace, and saving power. Slavery, in this case, does not mean blacks are inferior (as their slave masters thought); but they were

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superior, chosen by God for a unique role in history. As African-American reflections on the evils they endured, these various options came across as vastly more compelling arguments than do attempts of white Christians to answer the question of slavery in America.

In my estimation the Bushmans' book on *Mormons in America* merits a mixed review as not equal in quality to the three volumes reviewed above. On the positive side it has several commendable aspects, especially for those who have little acquaintance with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mormon history is summarized very well from its beginning under Joseph Smith in the 1820s in Palmyra, New York to the present world-wide status of the church. Along the way, key Mormon sites in Kirkland, Ohio; Independence, Missouri; Nauvoo, Illinois; and Salt Lake City, Utah are woven into the saga of the people, their faith, their persecutions, and their accomplishments. The desperate trek from Illinois to Utah is well told.

The authors also do a good job of setting forth Mormon beliefs as they developed over time, and the sources of their faith in the books they regard as scripture. Key leaders in the movement are introduced, and the structure of the church and its ministry is explained. Highlighted are the relief and social services agencies of the church. Many also would find the description of temple activities enlightening (p.109). The depictions of the duties of ordinary Mormons are positive, especially as they relate to strong family bonds.

The parts of the book that one might call social history come through with candor and the support of good statistical research. Claudia Bushman had previously written the book *Mormon Sisters: Women in Early Utah*, and this interest and expertise seem to account for chapter 6, which is devoted to Mormon women in the years 1831-1890. On the subject of polygamy, she points out that it was hardest on the women, who could admit their problems to each other even though they defended it publicly against the critics and opponents of the Mormon religion (pp. 86-89). She notes the role of women in the social ministries of the church and points out that Mormon women had the right to vote in Utah fifty years before the woman's suffrage movement in the United States.

Chapter 8 is most enlightening on social data of all sorts: longevity (Mormons on average live 10 years longer than other U.S. Citizens); birth rates (Utah has the highest fertility rate in the country), divorce (slightly below the national average); premarital sex and teenage pregnancy (lower) while teenage child birth is high (since they are encouraged not to resort to abortion); and education (more Mormons go to college and graduate school than their peers). They are candid in admitting that the two year stints of young Mormon

missionaries are not very efficient in gaining new converts, but the size of the mission force produces good results, nonetheless (p.122). They also reveal that current rates of baptized members leaving the church run anywhere from 20-50% (p.116). Overall, the book presents the Mormon faith as attractive and growing; at 10 million members, and doubling in size every 15 years (p.11), the authors predict it will become a major world religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (p.131).

Negatively, this reviewer felt they sometimes failed to maintain proper emotional distance from their subject as is expected in academic work. This stands out when contrasted to Professors Diner and Raboteau, who strongly identify with their own people but understand that scholarly writing expects authors to be reporters and not cheerleaders. Several particulars point to this defect.

The crisis in leadership after Joseph Smith was killed produced a power struggle. The larger body of Mormons followed Brigham Young to Utah and became a great worldwide church. The reorganized church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints took Joseph Smith III (the founder's son) as their leader and continued at Nauvoo, Illinois (the prophesied site of the coming New Jerusalem). Smith's wife Emma also stayed with this group. They are still a functioning church group, primarily in the mid-west. They deserve more attention than the authors give them (p.53).

The report of the Mountain Meadows Massacre in Utah is presented as a regrettable incident that left a dark blot on the Mormon Church (pp.77-78). Still the incident is interpreted in such a way as to absolve Mormon leadership from guilt, putting most of the blame upon the Missouri party passing through Mormon territory and upon the actions of local American Indians. No mention is made of a considerable body of evidence that challenges these interpretations.

Claudia Bushman is obviously interested in the role of Mormon women as is clear from the accounts in chapter 6. One is a bit surprised, then, that on p.115 the book is content to report the church's belief that men and women are equal in status but different in roles, meaning women cannot function in congregational ministry roles or in general authority positions in the church. Do the authors support this stance? Or did they find it prudent not to critique or challenge the church's stance?

Admittedly the Bushmans' write under difficult circumstances. They note (p.16) that the stories of Joseph Smith's original visions is what separates Mormons from other Christians. Mormons have not yet received the acceptability among North Americans that both Jews and African-Americans have. Therefore, Diner and Raboteau do not need to be advocates for their people in the same as the authors of the last volume feel they must.

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Also, the need to write for an academic audience - and its demand for critical objectivity -while not offending one's church (which wants favorable views projected to the public) is a daunting task for any author. These considerations probably need to be factored into the negative critiques of the book.

The four volumes of this review, along with the three titles reviewed previously in the *Ashland Theological Journal*, are samples of the entire project. The series succeeds in providing volumes of significant content and high interest. There is very little to criticize in these books. One is well served by reading individual titles or in purchasing the entire set. At \$28 a volume, they are well worth the price.