

Philip Goff, ed., *Blackwell Companion to Religion in America*

Hans Krabbendam



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REFERENCES

(Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), ISBN 9781405169363, 729 pp. L 110.

- 1 Philip Goff, professor of Religious Studies and American Studies at Indiana University, identifies two reasons for this encyclopedia of religion in America: the historic change in religion itself—from hegemony by liberal Protestantism to pluralism without a clear center in the past fifty years—and the change in research in the same period under the impact of civil rights, feminism, immigration and political polarization. The result is an impressive collection mapping out the genealogy of research topics in religion, built on a strong historiographical and bibliographical basis.
- 2 The new elements in this overview include thematic studies on topics such as religion and health, labor, media, and popular culture. These are the topics that religious studies scholars take pride in. But the editor also secures a link with previous practitioners of the more traditional genre of denominational history, which continues to be written by adherents. These studies, the predictable Protestant -, Catholic -, Jewish variations with most attention to the Protestants, are accompanied by overviews of Native-American, non-Western, and New Religious Movements. These essays are placed at the back of the book, in the section on traditions and movements as background material for the showcase in the first part. This collection is a combination of these two approaches which all include elements of consensus, conflict, and contact. Though the book does not explicitly seek to offer a grand narrative as other scholars sought to do, it implicitly tells the story of the growth of religious diversity. Sometimes there is a hint of a celebration of pluralism, mostly as a matter of fact, occasionally as a moral ideal. This also reveals continuity with earlier generations, who celebrated the development of religious freedom or of denominational growth more openly. Despite

this subtext the second part resists an ultimate relativism, which creates a healthy tension among the essayists.

- 3 The first 24 of the 43 essays are followed by 19 traditions, averaging 15 pages concluded by a reading list. The alphabetical order in each part is a straightforward way of presenting these topics, which reveals a field in motion. Yet it would not have been impossible and perhaps better to get a closer grasp of this developing discipline had the essays been grouped in sets of related topics. For instance family, gender and women certainly share many connections, as do borderlands, missions, and regions. The essays on class, labor, and economics reinforce one another as do the essays on the American revolution, church and state, civil religion, and social reform. Also film, sensory cultures, media, popular culture belong together, as do Millennialism, revivals, theology, and science. Such clusters offer coherence in an expanding field without much direction.
- 4 Similarly, the traditions might have been grouped together in for instance classic Christian, New Religious movements, Minority religions, and World religions. Such a classification might have been conducted in a variety of ways, but the result would have emphasized the inner connections. In any case these sets would have led to an explicit justification of the selection, which is now missing. In addition to creating more cohesion a number of overlaps and contradictions could have been prevented. For example the essay on church and state devotes a large section to civil religion as a vital cultural force, while the next essay is entirely devoted to American Civil Religion, and is loaded with criticism and arguments to abandon the concept. (67). While it is nice to see the discussion raging through the pages, it would have been even better to let the discussants refer to each other.
- 5 I sense a bit of a struggle between the celebration of diversity in the first part and the desire to defend the strengths of one's own tradition in the second. In that respect the volume's duality is a masterstroke that places the (mild) advocacy of traditions in opposition to the thematic appeals for pluralism in the first section. All denominational histories try to place their group at the heart of America, even, or especially when they are outsiders or feel like it (like Catholics and Lutherans, but also Mormons). Warnings are issued not to dismiss the strong traditions of the past, such as liberal Protestantism. Eventually the link between the American nation and religious traditions is the unifying narrative. This is not always made explicit, because it reflected the state of the nation, which moved from confident to confused.
- 6 One should not conclude from the denominational section (in which the essay on denominationalism from the first part would have fitted nicely) that this is old stuff. For instance, the impact of transnational studies is clear in the chapter on the Lutheran tradition. Something similar could have been accomplished, had the chapter on New and Homegrown religions included the Jehovah Witnesses (only mentioned in the chapter on media for using radio programming and Millennialism) to assess the international dissemination of these unique American phenomena.
- 7 Let my editorial remarks not be read as a critique of the book. On the contrary, they are meant to emphasize its usefulness. If the purpose of this order is to tease the reader to make her or his own connections, it worked brilliantly. The value of this book is that it helps historians and religious scholars to discover connections they might have overlooked in their fields. The collection offers beginners in the discipline a concise, relevant, and sophisticated introduction. It draws the reader into contemporary

scholarly debates and teaches her or him sensitivity to different readings and the pitfalls of language. American Studies courses could very well use this fresh approach to cover a rich combination of history and culture. Europeans, who often feel lost in the American religious landscape, will not only find their way thanks to the excellent chapters on revivalism, civil religion, and especially denominationalism, but will be encouraged to discover how these American phenomena also shaped non-Christian movements and traditions.

- 8 My only regret is that the index of a book that encourages the reader to make her or his own connections is a bit careless. I missed a number of Billy Graham's, while Billy Sunday did not make the index at all, nor did influential fundamentalists such as Francis Schaeffer and Carl McIntire. But even these missing entries in the index will not take away the blessings of this book.

AUTHOR

HANS KRABBENDAM

Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands.