The Struggle for America's Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism by Robert Wuthnow (Review)

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throughout the history of the United States and its colonial antecedents. It is a striking story, placed as it is within the context of a country where almost everyone has affirmed the American tradition of the separation of the institutions of government and religion.

Major attention is given to the pre-Civil War years. Four chapters discuss in detail the impact of the American Revolution on the religious life and institutions of the new nation. A perceptive essay on "Religion and Politics in the Antebellum North" is especially welcome. While much attention in recent years has been given to religion in the old South, religion in the pre-Civil War North has suffered comparative neglect. One of the incidental values of the volume is that it presents in concise form the conclusions reached by John Wilson, Nathan Hatch, Harry Stout, and Daniel Howe after extensive research and mature reflection, and presented elsewhere in extended form with thorough documentation. These are given here in brief compass that is readily accessible.

An interesting feature of the book is the inclusion of comparative studies of the British and Canadian experience in the relationship of religion and politics by Richard Cawardine of the University of Sheffield and George Rawlyk of Queen's University in Ontario. While presented in the book as a "comparative" theme, the discussion of the Afro-American church in the United States by David Wells exists as a lonely thumb among the other essays, none of which gives attention to the "overwhelming reality of the white presence" in the United States and its corollary of the "continuing unassimilated African presence" within the American body politic.

Rochester, Minnesota

WINTHROP S. HUDSON


In eight provocative sociological essays, most of which were public lectures, Princeton's Robert Wuthnow explores many aspects of contemporary American religious life. He focuses especially on changes in secular life that have affected religious faith, values, and mobilization; the shifting of boundaries between government and the voluntary sector; and the polarization that has occurred in religion as in politics between conservatives (that is, evangelicals) and liberals. The conservative-liberal bifurcation is his most persistent concern, as the title of the book may suggest, and all the essays lend some insight into it. There is less unity, however, than one would find in a monograph. A chapter on irreligiosity among scientists offers the intriguing suggestion that irreligiosity, which seems greater in the social sciences and humanities than in the natural sciences, is a "boundary-posturing mechanism" that serves to provide plausibility. But it has little direct bearing on other chapters.
Wuthnow’s contention that a binary division between conservatives and liberals has replaced Will Herberg’s tripartite division of Americans into Protestants, Catholics, and Jews is well reasoned and persuasive. It is a case that he has made more fully, and for historians probably more satisfactorily in *The Restructuring of American Religion* (1988). Though Wuthnow acknowledges that neither side is monolithic, he is more impressed by the negative perceptions, hostile rhetoric, and battle-like formations in special interest groups that characterize conservative-liberal relations. The situation, he says, is “rife with conflict” (p. 24). One of his most interesting findings is that, unlike other intergroup conflict, distaste increases rather than diminishes when conservatives and liberals become better acquainted.

This division will not disappear soon. It is a more or less permanent feature of the cultural landscape. Conflict over a few historically-specific events, such as the Supreme Court’s decisions on abortion or Bible reading and prayer in the public schools, might pass away after a flurry of activity. But this polarization arises from fundamental changes in the structure of society and in popular values reaching back across the postwar period. Such changes include the erosion of traditional denominational demarcations, urbanization and mobility, the drastic upheavals of the 1960s, and the influences of higher education on religious belief. An epilogue summarizes Wuthnow’s mixed feelings about the effects of polarization on American life and offers suggestions for containing the damage through improved dialogue.

Several chapters merit special notice because of their sharp focus and precise analysis. Each might profitably be read alone. One is a case study of Presbyterianism that both explores the internal struggle in that communion in the context of its decline in membership and appraises various strategies for ameliorating more or less immutable conflict. Presbyterians make an especially good test case because of their systematic data-gathering on members’ beliefs. Another notable chapter assesses religious television as a reflection of secularizing trends with greater sophistication than most studies this reviewer has seen. Especially concerned with the assertion that television privatizes religious faith, Wuthnow concludes that it does tend to have that effect; paradoxically, it also projects religion into the public arena, turns private issues into public ones, and reinforces the conservative-liberal cleavage. Finally, a chapter on the “marginality” of social scientists at evangelical colleges stresses their distinctive worldview, lack of research support, and location outside the networks that determine scholarly outlets as the principal obstacles they face. With both empathy and realism (which some would find confining), Wuthnow suggests that they capitalize on the current interest in evangelicalism by interpreting it to outsiders and, the reverse, mediate secular academic discourse back into their own communities.
As a good sociologist always should, Wuthnow liberally utilizes pertinent sociological theories and research data. The work is both well written and historically grounded.

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Dayton, Ohio

JACOB H. DORN


The religious history of the southwestern rim of the United States from New Orleans to Los Angeles does not fit easily into the usual paradigms employed by historians, and thus tends to slip through the cracks of narrative and analysis. (It is interesting to note that Sandra Sizer Frankiel's excellent study of religion in California invokes New England Transcendentalism as a major causative force.) Marta Weigle's study of the Penitente movement, now available in paperback, is an important resource in trying to correct this long-standing imbalance.

The Penitentes, a lay Catholic confraternity known for dramatic public penances during the Lenten season including self-flagellation, have found a worthy interpreter in Weigle, a folklorist who teaches anthropology and American studies at the University of New Mexico. The author utilizes a combination of interpretative techniques to try to bring into perspective a movement that is mainly known to outsiders through the same sort of sensationalist publicity that has colored our knowledge of snake-handling Pentecostals and polygamous Mormons.

The book is divided into several chapters dealing with the broad geographical setting and cloudy historical origins of the Penitentes; their roots in a distinctive style of Hispanic Franciscan piety; their relationship with the Spanish and then French and Anglo Catholic religious authorities in the area, as well as with occasional Protestant missionaries and the secular press; the group's real and alleged political involvements; and in the concluding section, their organizational structure, social relations, and ritual practices. A lengthy selection of primary documents in English and Spanish, printed with the approval of Penitente leaders, concludes the book. Geographical, historical, sociological, ethnological, and history of religions perspectives are all invoked in describing and analyzing the movement; all are helpful and generally well done, and the conclusion, which utilizes typologies developed by Mircea Eliade and Victor Turner, is especially useful to students of religion. The overall effect of these frequent shifts in perspective in this rather short study is slightly choppy, however, and traditional historians may find its multidisciplinary approach somewhat unsettling.