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Andrew C. Rieser. *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. x + 416 pp. $37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-12642-7.

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That Old Time Religion in a Brave New World

In his recent book, *What's the Matter With Kansas*, Thomas Frank seeks to explain how states once known as hotbeds of prairie populism and progressive reform became reliable bastions of the Republican party. Part of this transformation, Frank asserts, has resulted from Republicans' successful repudiation of the federal government's role as intermediary and regulator and its attacks on Democrats as effete, godless, latte-drinking, *New York Times*-reading snobs who are out of touch with "real" Americans.[1]

In a sort of "historian's prequel" to Frank's tome, Andrew C. Rieser wants to help us understand how "ordinary, nonelite (especially rural) middle class [some might say 'real'] Americans" used religion to "sympathize with the victims of capitalism and accept the proposition that certain social goods and relations should be protected from the market" through the intervention and supervision of the federal government (p. 10).

One of the agents of this transformation was the Chautauqua movement, an outgrowth of the summer Sunday School Institutes begun by the Methodist-Episcopal church in the early 1870s. Established by John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller in 1874 as a primarily educational rather than evangelistic entity, this camp located in the extreme western corner of New York secured its national reputation after a visit from Ulysses S. Grant in 1875. Chautauqua leaders cemented it by expanding its program during the nation's centennial year, focusing on science. By the 1880s, Chautauqua had developed an eight-week summer program providing a prominent stage for "Social Gospel-minded academics, politicians, preachers, prohibitionists and reformers" and was spawning imitators across the country (p. 45).

Rieser's description of Chautauqua's rise from "austere simplicity" to "Victorian perfection" mirrors the work of R. Laurence Moore, who has argued that organized religion has, almost from America's beginning, secularized and commodified itself in order to recruit new adherents and hang on to the old ones.[2] Religion, Moore asserts, is always most popular in its "intellectually debased" forms.

Rieser does not quibble with Moore's thesis of commodification. Indeed, he shows that the elders of the Chautauqua movement initially attacked, then resisted, but ultimately grudgingly accepted new social developments, especially–for Rieser's purposes–the summer vacation. They also cozied up to railroad companies, real estate developers, and zoning boards to help shape their retreat into "suburban communities, giving their racial, gender, and class assumptions a more subtly permanent form" and making the "yawning inequities of race and classâ?¦appear 'natural'" (p. 85).

However, Rieser contends, the Chautauqua movement, its proliferation, and even its decline, are not signs of debasement as Moore may charge, or of creeping secularization, as archetypal scholars like Robert Wiebe or Max Weber might suggest.[3] Despite its accommodations to culture, Chautauqua confronted its constituents with three "vital precepts of the liberal creed:" that modern life had grown too complex for common folk to comprehend; that monotheistic morality offered the only true hope for social progress; and that government needed to obey the dictates of the devout middle-class conscience (pp. 85-86). These ideas became so compelling that Chautauqua spawned Roman Catholic and Jewish imitators who appropriated the "Chautauqua idea" but modified it to "preserve ethno-religious traditions within a Protestant majority" (p. 124). Rieser even describes Chautauqua's decline as a byproduct of its successful inculcation of a broad faith in government's ability to regulate the brave new world of the marketplace. In addition, compulsory public education, the professionalization of social work, and the proliferation of higher education made Chautauqua increasingly unnecessary (p. 286).

In many ways Rieser's analysis of Chautauqua is reminiscent of numerous recent studies of the YMCA.[4]

Many within the YMCA also embraced the social gospel. Both were exclusively Protestant organizations seeking greater inclusivity, at least on some level. Both invested heavily in public education, camping, and recreation; both struggled over their relationship with women, immigrants, and African Americans; and both declined significantly as government, private interests, and other competitors and imitators encroached on territory that had originally been primarily theirs.

Rieser provides a fascinating story about a long-ignored American institution, but the tale is not without its flaws. His critique of Chautauqua's intolerance seems tired. True, its ecumenical identity was undoubtedly "predicated on exclusion," enticing immigrants to "behave like 'good Americans"' by offering "the greatest gift of all, the right to call oneself white" (p. 159). But how surprising is this assessment? In his introduction Rieser addresses the historians' sin of "presentism," but rather quickly brushes off this concern, simply asserting that the problem is rampant within the profession (pp. 5-6). One does not need to be a conservative curmudgeon to believe that his assessment of Chautauqua's "vaunted inclusiveness" is an imposition of the present on the past. After all, just how ecumenical did most Chautauquans really expect to be? Did they truly wish to learn from those far outside their constituency or, more probably, win them over to their cause? Rieser further states that his is the first major book on Chautauqua to be published, then quickly establishes that it will employ a content analysis focusing primarily on race and gender–two issues of great importance today, but not necessarily those best suited to represent the movement or introduce scholars to it.

Despite these relatively minor drawbacks, Rieser winsomely and insightfully presents and analyzes the flaws, the merits, and the contradictions found within the liberal, socially conscious Protestant ethos of the Chautauqua movement. He steers a steady course between the treacle and vitriol that can infuse historical examinations of religion. Rieser's discussion of the physical space Chautauqua occupied and its possible influence on middle-class dreams of suburbia and the public services that accompanied it is intriguing and worthy of further consideration. As in Alan Brinkley's earlier analyses of the Depression-era "Share Our Wealth" and "National Union for Social Justice" movements, Rieser traces the multifarious ways in which female members of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (including Ida Tarbell and Grace Farrington Gray) modified the organization's creed for their own purposes.[5] And Rieser uses Chautauqua effectively as a new avenue through which to add to our understanding of the progressive tradition. Historians, he writes, still tend to describe progressivism as an urban middle-class phenomenon when in fact many progressives had deep rural roots (p. 264).

But given our most recent presidential election and the intense discussion of "faith" and "values" that followed in its wake, much of Rieser's audience will be drawn primarily to his observations regarding the role of religious education in forming a broader, more liberal social consciousness. He seems to encourage such an interest in his introduction:

"While we criticize the pluralistically religious middle classes of the early twentieth century for inviting corporate hegemony, we should also give them credit for envisioning new–if flawed–ways of sustaining democratic ideals in the consumer age. *For those who still believe that the great middling classes can be moved by reason, these ideals are worth preserving* (emphasis mine)" (p. 13).

Notes

[1]. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

[2]. R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). See also Finke and Starke, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: The Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 11.

[3]. Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

[4] See, for example, Thomas Winter, *Making Men, Making Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002); Nina Mjagkij, *Light in the Darkness* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2003), and Clifford Wallace Putney, *Muscular Christianity* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[5] Alan Brinkley. *Voices of Protest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

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