

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patrick W. Carey. *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005. 428 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-4300-5.

Reviewed by Joseph McCaffrey (Religion Department, Syracuse University)

Published on H-Catholic (June, 2005)

You Don't Need a Weathervane

I always thought that I would like to teach a course on nineteenth-century American religion entirely from the life of Orestes Brownson (1803-1876). After all, one could meander with Brownson from Presbyterianism, through the rise of Unitarian and Universalist thought, take a detour through a temporary atheism, return with a robust sense of Christian Socialism and religious democracy, and not be hardly done. After Brownson's inevitable disappointment with a republican millennium (which would give us a chance to explore Miller's Great Disappointment and the end of the Awakening), we could wax both ecclesiastic and transcendental, commune with America's Concord elite, until our good Orestes takes wing and flies us (where else is left?) to Rome. All things ethnic and theological would then keep us busy, but not too busy for such grand characters as Archbishop John Hughes of New York and Isaac Hecker's fledgling Paulist establishment. Brownson's writings would lead us into every major issue, foreign or domestic, political, social, or philosophical that consumed America in his day. What a grand way to explore most of a century without leaving the life of this singular man!

Or so I thought, before reading Patrick Carey's wonderful book, *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane*. Carey has convinced me, with this careful, insightful intellectual biography, that Brownson was always more than the context of his life. Although the ideas, people, and events that concerned Brownson open up so much of his times, and his multiple conversions give the appearance of a Cook's tour of the American religious landscape, that focus blurs the internal consistency and dialectal development of his thought. Carey corrects or deepens Brownson's previous biographers on many issues, such as the key role of his 1842 religious experience to his later thought and life. Carey opens up new interpretations of Brownson's shift of thought in 1850, his "liberalism" in the 1850s, and Brownson's reaction to the decrees of Vatican Council I. These insights are

due to Carey's synthetic approach to Brownson, his sympathetic reading of seemingly everything the man ever wrote, and his careful attention to Brownson's intellectual sources, both American and European.

Carey argues convincingly that Brownson's doctrine of communion and his search for a synthetic philosophy are the keys to understanding his life. Brownson was deeply affected by the thought of Pierre Leroux, which provided him with the vocabulary to express his dissatisfaction with idealist theology, especially that of Theodore Parker. In 1842, Brownson's religious experience, as well as these intellectual influences, positive and negative, constituted a conversion of thought and life that affected the rest of his days. From that time on, Brownson attempted to synthesize God's freedom with the communion of all humanity, and of humanity with God. Carey maintains that Brownson's journey to Rome makes sense only in the light of this religious and philosophical conversion experience.

I have read Brownson mostly to learn of his use of the philosophy of "ontologism," which I encountered while doing a dissertation on Rev. Louis A. Lambert (1835-1910), editor of the *New York Freeman's Journal* (1894-1910) and author of *Notes on Ingersoll* (1883). Lambert used Brownson's ontological argument for the existence of God in his controversial work on Ingersoll, and was still defending the orthodoxy of Brownson's ontologism on the pages of the *Freeman's Journal* as late as the turn of the century. Carey makes sense of Brownson's ontologism by carefully showing how it emerges from and yet differs from its roots in Italian philosophy and theology, chiefly that of Vincenzo Gioberti. Carey insists that Brownson's ontologism is distinguished by its synthetic character, in that he added a psychological dimension to the philosophical reflection. This made Brownson's ontologism orthodox.

A little gem in this book is the bibliographic essay entitled "A Note on the Sources." It provides a clear guide

to scholarship on Brownson, with judicious evaluation of previous works. But, since Brownson's life touched so many themes, Carey has provided a roadmap to a significant portion of literature on nineteenth-century American social, intellectual, and religious history.

I have a few small quarrels with minor points. Carey refers to the section of upstate New York, where I live, as the "Finger Lake" region, while we always use the plural "Finger Lakes." The geography of upstate New York that he describes, especially the distance between towns, their counties, and their placement in regions, was confusing to me. Perhaps I would understand better if there were a map.

Carey, a theology professor at Marquette University, is presently editing *The Early Works of Orestes A. Brownson: The Universalist Years, 1826-1829*, which have reached four volumes to date (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2000). His scholarly articles include essays on ontologism, Brownson's reaction to the Dred Scott decision, and "Tradition" in Brownson's thought. This biography

is a culmination of a long course of study by a scholar steeped in his subject.

Carey's biography is part of the Library of Religious Biography, published by Eerdmans and edited by Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and Alan C. Guelzo. One must be grateful to Eerdmans for publishing this series, but one also wishes that Carey would have been free to include footnotes and expand the book beyond the page limits prescribed by the publisher. More than once Carey complains that he must cut short his treatment due to space constraints. However, one should not complain about the book that was not written, and concede that *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane* is a wonderful addition to American religious historiography, and will make Carey's Brownson scholarship, especially his work on the complete edition of Brownson's early works, available to the general historical reader. I would heartily recommend this biography to those interested in American religious and intellectual history, to college and university libraries, and to those who enjoy lively intellectual biography.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Joseph McCaffrey. Review of Carey, Patrick W., *Orestes A. Brownson: American Religious Weathervane*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10623>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.