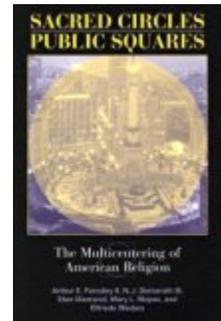


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Arthur E. Farnsley Wedam, II, N.J. Demerath III, Etan Diamond, Mary L. Mapes, Elfriede. *Sacred Circles, Public Squares: The Multicentering of American Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. x + 239 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34472-4.

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## The Interplay of Religious Congregations and Neighborhoods in Indianapolis: A Useful Taxonomy

They say you can't judge a book by its cover. In this case, you can't judge it by its title either. To find out that this is a "detailed study of the religious landscape of the city of Indianapolis," a "study of religion and its changing role in contemporary life [which] focuses on Indianapolis, Indiana," one has to read the inside front flap of the book jacket and the jacket's back. A reader shouldn't need a review of a work or its physical presence to discover its subject: that's the job of the title. In addition to the words "multicentering" and "religion," the subtitle should have included the phrase "The Indianapolis Example" (or "Model" or "Test Case"). The Indianapolis connection is certainly robust: the study is not only about the city's congregations and neighborhoods, but was funded by the Lilly Endowment, headquartered in the city.

*Sacred Circles, Public Squares* is the capstone of a multiyear, multimillion-dollar Project on Religion and Urban Culture (PRUC) housed at the Polis Center on the campus of Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). The project produced some seven books, two video series, and "Spirit and Place," an annual civic festival bringing authors and thinkers, film and performances to Indianapolis to provoke a "city-wide conversation" (p. viii).

The authors are published scholars either as historians—specialists in "suburbanization and in religion's relationship to social welfare"—or sociologists who conducted field research (p. 10). This meant that 413 con-

gregations representing eighteen neighborhoods within Marion Count or bordering it were chosen to fill out detailed census forms. Along with three other more traditional surveys, all conducted by the Indiana University Center for Survey Research, this generated the data on which much of the work depended.

The historians provide a fine discussion of the "Circle City on the Plains"—its changing structure and development from its founding in the 1820s to the 1990s. Indianapolis was born artificially through legislative enactment based on the need to place the political capitol near the geographical center of the state. The planned city had its own center, the Circle, a half-block north of the main east-west artery, with Meridian Street running north and south (once intended as the governor's residence, the Circle was never so used, but after the Civil War when the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument was built it became the real center of the city as well as its icon). The narrative traces the shift from a town centered commercially, politically, and religiously downtown, to a "decentered" metropolis of innumerable neighborhoods and congregations; from a time when four of the five mainline Protestant churches (Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Disciples of Christ, and Baptist) occupied the Circle, with the fifth less than a block away, to a time when that same religious elite constituted the power brokers, and public religious observance held there attracted huge numbers.

Inevitably, however, religion became pluralistic and decentered. In great contrast to other cities of the north-

east and Midwest, European immigrants—in particular Catholics and Jews—did not settle Indianapolis in large numbers. While Catholics made up more than half of all churchgoers in Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, and Louisville, in Indianapolis they were less than one-fourth of the churchgoers and a mere 10 percent of the population. Of these cities only Indianapolis had more mainline Protestants and evangelicals and independents than Catholics. Nonetheless, Catholic schools, charity efforts, and a centralized administration topped by a bishop, has seen it move from the periphery to the core and at the expense of mainline Protestants.

Abetting the decentering process, Jews and black also became important parts of the religious landscape. Jews, while numbering now about 10,000 with only five synagogues, given the great deal of cooperation among them are a “minority with muscle” (p. 95). Whether observant or non-observant, Indianapolis Jews are well off, well educated, and cohesive. Blacks are numerous, forming one quarter of Marion County by 2000. But blacks are very diverse and poorer and as a result less influential. The wide range of theological traditions among blacks—Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Independent—means that no one can speak with authority for the more than 350 congregations. One overwhelmingly black neighborhood (95 percent) has almost 100 churches for its 11,000 residents. Like the nation, Indianapolis blacks are more religious, more churched, and more given to a literal interpretation of the Bible. White evangelical congregations are similar to black ones in being fragmented, small, and fundamentalist.

As in the nation, the numbers of mainline Protestants in Indianapolis fell between 1925 and 2000 from 21 percent to 13 percent, while religious membership rose from 41 percent to 46 percent. The “market share” of Catholics and evangelical Protestants—white and black—was the principal gain. In time, growing religious pluralism saw a more “nonsectarian civil religion” make patriotism, sports, government, and commerce the badges of good citizenship” (p. 111).

The questions the book turns to are: How influential are the churches in the life of the city under the decentering circumstances obtaining especially since World War Two? How have congregations influenced neighborhoods and, in turn, neighborhoods influenced congregations? To answer these questions is the work of the sociologists, who provide a taxonomy of four “ideal” types of congregations and four “ideal” types of neighborhoods (naturally, the ideal types are “intended to be more con-

ceptually suggestive than empirically iron clad” [p. 155]; they are really tendencies, approximations, not x-rays of reality).

“External” congregations may be “horizontal,” looking outside the wall of their church to offer “community outreach” (for example, an elite church’s mission to a poor one in the inner city, a food pantry, or tutoring program), or “vertical,” focusing on the relationship between God and humanity and “conversion” (evangelizing for new members, changing a person’s relationship with God). “Internal” congregations may focus on the needs of its members. They may provide “customer service,” catering to the spiritual, social, and even physical needs of members, or be “cloistered,” characterized by being fundamentalist, inward-looking, focusing on personal salvation, eschewing “works,” isolated even from the surrounding neighborhood.

Neighborhoods, it turns out, are difficult to fix in Indianapolis. Like the relatively small effect immigration played in the city’s development, because Indianapolis “grew so quickly from town to metropolis” and “resisted most federal housing programs, it skipped much of the intensive neighborhood development stage that other cities experienced” (p.154). It also has less of the conventional urban infrastructure: subways, high-density housing, extensive street lighting, large parks, and small residential lots. There are other difficulties: the 200 neighborhoods and districts in the metropolitan area exhibit a great deal of amorphousness regarding boundaries, leading many residents to identify simply with the “side” of town they live in: north, south, east, or west. (Not mentioned by the authors is that the city, being flat, lacks the geography that would lead an observer to recognize certain areas as self-contained units.) Semi-juridical units are overseen by the city’s Department of Metropolitan Development and these and the many neighborhood associations overlap; the nine townships responsible for services such as fire, schools, and poor relief multiply the overlap and complexity. To make sense of the complexity, the authors sampled eighteen neighborhoods and districts, and classified them as one of four “ideal” types, just as they had done for congregations.

The first distinction is that neighborhoods can be seen as either “in demand” or “by default” places depending on status, social capital, material resources, as well as religion, race, or ethnicity. The second distinction is whether the neighborhood is “centered” or “decentered.” Centered neighborhoods tend heavily to influence their residents’ lives through their institutions and associations,

developing in their residents a “sense of self and collective identity” (p. 156). Decentered places are a mere “collection of houses” and inspire little sense of identity or community.

The pairs, “centered/decentered” and “in demand/by default,” produce four cells of possibility: centered/in demand, which are labeled “parlor” neighborhoods; centered/by default, called “porch”; decentered/in demand, or “garage”; and decentered/by default, called “kitchen” neighborhoods. Parlor neighborhoods are elite, wealthy areas with big houses, educated residents, and high social status. Kitchen neighborhoods are parlor’s opposites, exhibiting poverty, drugs, crime, decayed infrastructure, housing near the landfill and the chemical plant. Here residents turn inward, hunkering down in the kitchen. Porches, while inhabited more by default than demand, nonetheless have a sense of community, of belonging—an identity—thanks to race or ethnicity, shared social class or culture. An example would be a working-class, Slovene neighborhood anchored by a Catholic church, school, and ethnic recreation center. Garage locales describe suburban, middle-class places wholly dependent on the automobile. New developments, they are often plopped down on old, small towns and villages where the new residents have plenty of material capital but lack community identity and have little social capital.

What does all this have to do with religion? The authors state that there is an “obvious affinity between types of congregations and types of neighborhoods or urban districts” (p. 158). That is, the elite mainline religions (Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish) located in Indianapolis’ upper Meridian Street parlor neighborhood are characteristically “community outreach” congregations. Aware of their good fortune, these churches look outside their congregations using their resources to work programmatically with less favored congregations and neighborhoods. The kitchen neighborhood described in depth is one of working poor and working-class whites from Appalachia. Institutions are largely absent or lifeless; the churches are overwhelmingly Pentecostal and Baptist, with three-fourths of their membership commuters from outside the neighborhood. Mistrust and mutual disinterest define the relationship with the city. Described as suspicious, even misogynist, the congregational type in the kitchen neighborhood is “cloistered.” The porch neighborhood example is a former white area fifty years ago that is now black. Problems of crime and drugs abound but so does a sense of community identity, thanks in part to a strong neighborhood association with considerable social capital. And while the black church

is heavily evangelical and thus “conversion” is the expected congregational model, “community outreach” is just as important and characteristic of this porch model. Cloistered congregations are numerous in this scheme as well. The garage neighborhood examined is a white, middle-class, bedroom suburb of Indianapolis. Residents “seem constantly in car transit” to work, shops, schools, volunteering, visiting, playing, “and, not surprisingly, to church” (p. 179). The mission of a congregation in a garage neighborhood is mainly “customer service,” providing diversions, teen clubs, day nurseries with cheerful friendliness—whatever will bring the punters in.

Again, while each of the neighborhood types “is host to a range religious organizations, â? | there is a marked affinity between congregation and community” (p. 186). Thus, parlors are oriented to “community outreach” congregations that seek to aid other areas of the city in need; kitchen to cloister churches where residents hunker down, distancing themselves from the neighborhood and the city; garage neighborhoods most often become quasi-malls of customer service. The near Westside black area designated a porch displayed “a unique blend of conversion-oriented evangelism and an emphasis on social justice” (p. 186).

Beyond the uninformative title, there are other grounds on which to quarrel with the book. As the authors note, the public role of congregations has expanded to become potential solutions for social problems—drugs, crime, etc.—in the last decade thanks to “charitable choice” possibilities under welfare reform in 1996 and the present national administration’s “faith-based initiative.” Indianapolis’ Republican mayor from 1993 to 2001 had already developed a “Front Porch Alliance” centered on churches and neighborhoods, but the discussion in the text lacks details and neglects to describe what happened to the program under the next mayor, a Democrat. Was the topic too controversial, too political, too recent? Second, so influential, so dominant is the Lilly Endowment in the field of research on religion in America, let alone this work, that it raises worries about scholarly independence. The primary focus of the Endowment, “the country’s most generous and influential funder of basic research about religious life in America,” is to sustain “religion’s public role” and “to enhance the quality and depth of the religious lives of American Christians” (p. 143). After all, researchers on ballistic missile defense either profess to believe, keep quiet, go away, or are kicked out. The Pentagon doesn’t fund naysayers. Lilly Endowment’s influence on religious research is not ideal, leaving aside its assumption that sustaining religion’s “public role” is an

unmixed good. Finally, Hispanics are mentioned briefly, only twice, yet their presence in the city has exploded in the past ten years, precisely the years of the research. More might have been made of them, but then *ars longa, vita brevis*.

As a contribution to the scholarship on the conjuncture of urbanism and religion in the United States, the authors claim that their study differs from previous scholarship in three ways: focusing on a single city allows them to focus on details; the work combines structural

and cultural explanations; and they are more optimistic about the future, holding that “multicenteredness” is not “decenteredness” – “chronic or permanent loss of community” (p. 192). Indianapolis differs from other cities of the Midwest in important ways, as the authors note. The importance of their work will be whether their taxonomy of congregations and neighborhoods is found useful for other cities. For this reader it seems intuitively right, not artificial or forced. The tables, charts, and maps are clear and valuable.

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