

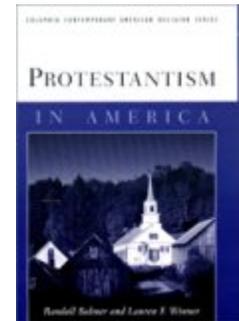
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Randall Balmer, Lauren F. Winner. *Protestantism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. xiii + 295 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-11130-0.

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An Inside View

Eminent historian of American evangelicalism Randall Balmer teams up with popular religion writer Lauren F. Winner (*God Meets Girl*, 2002) in this informative portrayal of America's most influential religious tradition. In artful fashion, the book joins ethnographic snapshots of a variety of contemporary Protestant church services and discussion of hot-button issues involving sex and justice to an excellent brief history of Protestant movements and institutions in the United States. Balmer and Winner write with both warmth and accuracy about a religious tradition they know as insiders as well as scholars. Without whitewashing Protestant history, or minimizing the antagonism among Protestants today over questions of feminism, homosexuality, and social justice, the authors present Protestantism in America with great fondness and in a very charitable light. They do not hesitate to bring flaws and divisions to view, but do so with the kind of empathy and underlying attachment to their subject that people often use when they describe their families.

One of the great strengths of the book is the clear historical overview it provides. In relatively short compass, the authors describe a variety of different institutions, movements, and controversies within American Protestantism with deftness and precision. In addition to graceful summaries of major developments, the historical sections of the book are peppered with anecdotes and details that reflect erudition as well as good writing.

The historical narrative comes together around the theme of evangelicalism's importance in American

Protestant history. Downplaying the relationship between Protestantism and Enlightenment thought, religious pluralism, and self-reliance, the authors play up emotional experiences of repentance and new birth as core elements around which much of the tradition revolves. Downplaying anti-Catholicism, militarism, and nationalism, the authors play up the heartfelt sincerity, kindness, and love of community they find throughout the Protestant tradition.

In combination with its clear presentation of American Protestant history, the book's attention to contemporary expressions of American Protestantism makes it stand out from other historical surveys. The ethnographic snapshots of contemporary church services make the book an excellent choice as a textbook for classroom use, especially in classes focusing on "lived religion." In classes where students are asked to make visits to religious places and report on events going on there, the descriptions provided in this book will serve as excellent models.

The back material of the book adds to its advantage as a highly useful text. Biographical profiles of twenty-five leaders of American Protestant history, supplemented with brief bibliographies for each, are especially helpful, and easy to consult when preparing a lecture. Readers with a variety of different needs and interests will find the book a handy reference and serviceable addition to their bookshelves.

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