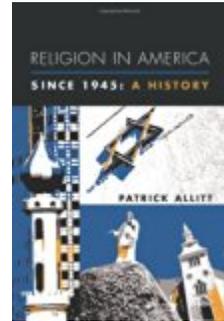


Patrick Allitt. *Religion in America since 1945: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. xviii + 316 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-12154-5; \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-12155-2.

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## Narrating Contemporary American Religious History

Patrick Allitt's *Religion in America since 1945: A History* presents a narrative of twentieth-century American religion between military conflicts: the U.S. nuclear engagement in World War II (1945) and the Al Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (2001). It is interesting to note that Allitt book-ends his study with the secular events of war, complicating his central organizing, yet paradoxical, claim that postwar America "was simultaneously a highly religious and a highly secular place" (p. xii). Allitt refers to a "strong tradition of church-state separation" throughout the text at the same time he organizes the story of religion in America around political events and issues, because "religious groups rarely created the issues, but their involvement led the participants to understand them as matters of transcendent significance" (pp. xii, 261).

Allitt informs his narrative using historian R. Laurence Moore's description of America as a religious marketplace (*Selling God*, 1994), as well as sociologist Robert Wuthow's categorization of American religious life as divided by political conflicts (*The Restructuring of American Religion*, 1988) and Peter Berger's study of religious peoples in a late-twentieth-century, modern America (*A Rumor of Angels*, 1969, and *The Heretical Imperative*, 1979). It is Allitt's use of journalistic accounts of religion and his grasp of popular culture, however, which make *Religion in America since 1945* an engaging and easy-to-read text for classroom use as well as general readers.

The text is organized both thematically and, for the

most part, chronologically, and Allitt is able to elaborate on twentieth-century details (environmental spirituality, space travel, Vietnam, religion, and sexual ethics) that teachers of "Religion in the United States" only dream they could cover in their one semester spanning of two-hundred-plus years of history. Allitt begins with reactions to WWII and the influence of both leading intellectual and public Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish figures in fueling a post-war religious revival. He spends a fair amount of time on Christian anti-communism and neo-orthodox theologians, but argues that "everyday religiosity" was best traced by the church and synagogue building boom (p. 33). Allitt devotes over ten pages to architectural debates: modernist versus traditionally designed houses of worship.

Chapter 3, "Religion, Respect, and Social Change: 1955-1968," explores the civil rights movement, black power, Nation of Islam, and Mormons. Allitt is adept at revealing a more complicated civil rights movement, complete with religious debate, conflict, and power relations. This reader, however, found several distracting comments in this chapter. Allitt rightly argues for a historical, critical look at the civil rights movement, but his asides often seem out of place. These include such statements as "historians can check documentary evidence and interview participants in recent historical events, but they cannot check up on God or get him to confirm or deny his actions" (p. 43); and "their [black clergy's] leadership position sometimes led ministers into temptation, and did not always deliver them from evil" (p. 45). Al-

litt's discussion of Mormonism in this period provides an interesting twist to the narrative. He connects the "active and dynamic" (p. 64) history of postwar Mormonism with racial reforms of the era by suggesting, "African American activists in the late 1950s and early 1960s used their religion to support their claim to first-class citizenship. American Mormons, by contrast had endured a long struggle to establish the principle that they were entitled to first-class citizenship *despite* their religion" (p. 59).

Chapter 4 begins with the election of John F. Kennedy, and then Allitt highlights several Supreme Court cases involving religion and the public schools. He includes a section on Vietnam and the mostly Catholic voices of opposition to intervention. He moves to radical Protestant theologians and controversy over "The Death of God" theology, but then transitions to a different type of debate—Catholic reform and Vatican II. By the end of the chapter, Allitt further divides American religious peoples into polarized camps: liberals and conservatives.

Allitt focuses on the polarization between reform and orthodox Judaism in chapter 5. He uses fiction to describe American Judaism and the "dilemma common to creative Jews who found their American prospects to be in tension with their religious tradition" (p. 100). While Allitt's discussion of American Judaism is thorough and engaging, there are some inconsistencies in his terminology, for example his inconsistent use of "Bible" and "Torah" (p. 89). Allitt also continues to highlight debates over war and civil rights in this chapter. He covers opposition to the Vietnam War and the sanctuary movement in both Protestant and Catholic churches as well as conflicted social and theological responses to race relations after the death of Martin Luther King.

Chapter 6, "Alternative Religious Worlds: 1967-1982" highlights everything from space travel, female clergy and feminist theologians to "new religions" (Jesus People and Jonestown) to American experimentations with Asian spirituality. While Allitt might feature the exotic at the expense of the mundane in this chapter, he concludes that "the new religions of the 1970s prospered only if they found ways to pass their vision on to new generations" (p. 146), arguing that the religious movements that survived the 1970s were "not exotic" (p. 147).

He switches gears in chapter 7 to evangelicals and politics from the Carter administration era through the rise of the New Religious Right, including political and religious debates over communism, abortion, pro-family

legislation, and gender issues. Allitt continues the activist debates between Christian left and right groups in chapter 8, by covering the antinuclear movement, creationism and evolution, and home schooling. With each issue, he presents a judicious, complicated picture of competing worldviews and ideologies by religious groups on both the left and the right. What might be missing is a discussion of religious peoples and ideas that reside in the middle.

Chapter 9, "Profits, Profligates, and Prophets: 1987-1995" explores televangelist scandals, Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson's runs for the presidential election, as well as Louis Farrakhan and American Islam. In the next chapter, "The New World Order: 1989-1999," Allitt argues that the events and scandals of the late-1980s were overshadowed by the fall of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War in the early 1990s. Allitt points out that there were several instances of religion and violence during the 1990s, including the 1992 federal raid on Christian survivalist Randy Weaver, the 1993 raid on the Branch Davidians, and the abortion clinic bombings. Interestingly, Allitt also includes, in this section, quite a large section on Christian and Jewish environmentalism juxtaposed to a subsequent discussion on the rise of sprawling megachurches.

Chapter 11 investigates the same decade before the millennium, but this time through the lenses of gender and sexuality issues, specifically homosexuality and religion, and the rise of the Christian men's movement, Promise Keepers. Allitt does not ignore the religious dimensions and fears surrounding the approaching millennium. While the eve of 2000 passed without much chaos, soon America would be struggling with the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Allitt concludes with religious reactions and ethical dimensions to the catastrophe. He argues that even though America's religious situation now has "greater diversity and greater politicization," Americans remain unified with "a strong faith in civility" (p. 264).

Allitt's text is a solid introduction to the diverse religious and political landscape in post-1945 America. He adeptly describes both conflict and consensus in American religious history. However, what is lacking from this more focused look at American religion over the last sixty years, is Allitt's choice of which details to include and how to organize them. Allitt rarely diverges from the Will Herberg, postwar Protestant/Catholic/Jewish ethos from which he begins. If one is looking for a textbook that gives ample space for post-1965 immigrant religions,

this is not the book for you. But Allitt does a good job of introducing immigrant Catholic populations, especially his attention to Hispanic Catholics. This is also not a text that attempts to restructure (let alone abolish) the common American religious history narrative. But Allitt does inform readers with his knowledge of popular culture, material culture, and architecture, while also providing ample attention to political issues. It will be up to readers to decide if the religious and political lines, which Allitt has described, hold up or will be redrawn in the twenty-first century.

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