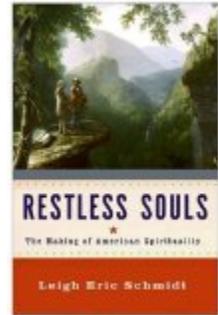


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Leigh Eric Schmidt. *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005. 352 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-054566-6; \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-06-085834-6.

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Published on H-Amstdy (September, 2007)



A Usable Past for the Spiritual Left

The latest book from Princeton University's Leigh Eric Schmidt, newly released in paperback, appeared at a propitious moment in the national conversation about religion and public life in the United States. In *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah*, Schmidt writes about—and indeed champions—the Spiritual Left as a counterpoint to the Religious Right, and his book, first published in August 2005, emerged just as the connections between faith and political liberalism enjoyed a period of renewed media interest—interest that has continued into the present. A recent forum on faith and politics, for instance, hosted by the liberal evangelical organization Sojourners and featuring Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John Edwards, drew nationwide attention to progressive Christianity as a political force. Not since the 1960s has the religious left been so visible in American public life. Schmidt's book augments this current conversation about the religious left (religion, here, meaning the institutional infrastructures of faith) with a broader historical examination of the Spiritual Left, encompassing all those facets of individual faith experience that give sustenance to public activism and private well-being.

Until this recent spate of coverage, the few stories that appeared in mainstream journalism regarding liberal forms of religion generally appraised it with a bemused "Why bother?" or a wistful "What went wrong?" Among those who have bothered to notice the spiritual left, religious conservatives have often dismissed it as New Age drivel while secular leftists have typically seen

it as the vestige of dying superstition. Academic treatments of contemporary spirituality, with a few notable exceptions, have been similarly dismissive, if not outright hostile. While scholars such as Amanda Porterfield and Catherine Albanese have written nuanced and often sympathetic accounts of spirituality in American cultural history, an old guard of religious historians still cringes at the term and those who embrace it. To all these critics, Schmidt's book says "not so fast."

The work focuses on the lives and writings of key seekers and innovators in the decades from the 1830s through the 1940s. Schmidt's study recovers from this period a legacy of exploration and experimentation on the margins of American Protestantism that, he contends, was neither escapist nor irrelevant, that provided potent resources for positive social and political change, and that continues to shape the cultural and spiritual life of the nation in profound ways. For Schmidt the story is a personal expression of spiritual sympathies, an offer of guidance and hope to fellow twenty-first-century seekers, and a political intervention—all in addition to the scholarly cultural and religious history one would expect from a university professor. When Schmidt succeeds in holding these disparate agendas—and audiences—together, as he generally does, the feat is truly remarkable.

Schmidt acknowledges at the outset his own "Emersonian and Whitmanite colors," and a sense of fondness, if not always complete identification, pervades Schmidt's

treatment of his protagonists (p. xii). These sympathies are most evident in the final chapter, in which Schmidt mounts a fierce defense of “Sheila Larson,” the pseudonymous informant from Robert Bellah’s highly influential *Habits of the Heart* (1985), who so infamously described her faith perspective as “Sheilaism.” Schmidt meticulously chronicles the deep tradition of faith Larson drew on, especially the writings of poet Max Ehrmann, a tradition Bellah and subsequent critics failed to uncover or appreciate. Contrary to the legion of scolds who decried the late-twentieth-century spirituality personified by Larson as solipsistic and banal—including, among those Schmidt names in addition to Bellah, the pundit David Brooks and the historian Martin Marty—Schmidt writes, pulling no punches: “If anything about this debate has become banal, it is the hackneyed familiarity of the male pundit’s jeremiad against Sheilaism—America’s self-made spirituality of me, myself, and I” (p. 284). Schmidt contends that Sheila and her ilk represent a humane spirituality deeply rooted in American culture, one that leads outward toward positive social engagement as well as inward toward greater self-understanding and happiness. Schmidt’s personal and forceful counter to the anti-spirituality jeremiads of Bellah, Brooks, and Marty marks the most clearly drawn battle lines in this strongly argued but rarely polemical book.

Out of those sympathies, Schmidt offers “a guide especially for those who are curious about the origins of the current boom in spirituality and who seek a sympathetic depiction of its many expressions” (p. xiii). Indeed, the most clearly realized ambition of *Restless Souls* is to provide today’s liberal spiritual seekers with a sense of their own religious heritage, and all the validation, inspiration, and resources a rich tradition imparts. On the individual level, Schmidt writes, “religious liberalism presents a self-critical tradition still very much worth contemplating and engaging,” especially for those twenty-first-century seekers looking for fellow travelers from the pages of history (p. 23). The historical heart of the book, covered in six thematically framed chapters, proceeds from the founding of the Transcendental Club in New England in the 1830s to an influential circle of Quaker and Quaker-influenced writers in the 1930s and 1940s. Much of the terrain is familiar to scholars of American religious history, though Schmidt’s various points of emphasis often make the familiar appear fresh. Schmidt’s foray into the history of mysticism as a category of experience and understanding in Anglo-American religious discourse is particularly helpful.

Colorful nineteenth-century characters such as

James Freeman Clarke and Thomas Wentworth Higginson receive thorough treatment alongside better-known figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, W. E. B. DuBois, and William James. The World’s Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, and the Greenacre retreat center in Maine, which flourished at the turn of the twentieth century, provide backdrops for the introduction of yet more spiritual adventurers from the American past. A strength of Schmidt’s narrative, in fact, is the extent to which he uses biography to ground his argument. Professional historians of a certain bent sniff at such extensive use of biography, but for Schmidt’s hybrid audience—both professional and popular—the approach seems appropriate and effective.

Schmidt’s personal commitments, he states at the outset, are not simply in sympathy with the spiritual seekers he chronicles, but also with their political agenda. “A highly productive alliance among liberals, progressives, and spiritual seekers has long been evident in American culture,” he notes, “and I count myself among those Americans who would like to see such associations remain vital in order to provide an essential counterpoint to all the values talk of the Religious Right” (p. xii). The history of liberal religion, he argues, offers a record of “strenuous activism and self-denying social engagement” that might provide the inspiration, and the intellectual and spiritual resources, necessary to counter the currently ascendant Religious Right (p. 22). This larger ambition, as he frames it, is a “serious reengagement of the interwoven history of liberalism, progressivism, and spirituality in American culture” (p. 19). Liberalism, according to Schmidt, “was always as much a religious vision of emancipated souls as a political theory of individual rights and civil liberties or an economic calculus of the beneficence of free markets” (p. 11). Schmidt here channels the protagonists of his tale, such as the Quaker activist and scholar Rufus Jones, who likewise defined their liberalism in capacious spiritual terms, rather than the narrow economic and political conceptions that predominate contemporary discourse. [Full disclosure: Schmidt cites a brief article of mine on Rufus Jones and mysticism.]

Despite all the ways this book seeks to nurture spiritual seekers and left-leaning activists, Schmidt offers it as “primarily a work of cultural history” (p. xii). Here as well the book provides much of value, primarily by reminding cultural and religious historians of the depth and variety of religious liberalism in this country, a history often overlooked now in our moment of fascination with all things conservative and evangelical. The the-

matic and narrative thrust of the text helps link religious seekers and innovators who drew on (or rebelled against) a variety of faith traditions, a useful service to the field of religious history which is still too often constrained by the boundaries of denomination and sect—constraints, Schmidt’s account makes clear, often not felt by Americans themselves.

For all the book’s considerable contributions as a work of cultural history, professional historians may find themselves wanting more in a few areas. The book makes no mention of the popular dissemination or reception of the ideas Schmidt so ably charts through his series of intellectual biographies. Who read the books or attended the lectures offered by these pioneering religious explorers? And why? And through what institutions or mechanisms of culture did the American public come to encounter these religious innovations? And for a book that aims to provide resources for a modern Spiritual Left, it offers very little detail from the past of actual political activism. Schmidt claims that religious liberals were more than dreamy mystics (on which point he surely is correct), yet these pages offer little more than passing references to rebut this allegation. The work of Ru-

fus Jones, Thomas Kelly, and other Quaker activists with the American Friends Service Committee, for instance, though mentioned briefly in a number of passages, would have provided a logical venue for Schmidt to explore more thoroughly how mystical spirituality informed and energized the drive for progressive social change. These are minor quibbles, however, with an ambitious and multifaceted project, and if nothing else they simply provide openings for others tilling the same fields.

Overall, as a work designed to encourage and sustain contemporary spiritual seekers and left-leaning religious activists, Schmidt’s book succeeds admirably. As a work of cultural and religious history, the challenges of writing for both a popular and a scholarly audience are more evident. Yet, at a time in our national conversation when the place of religion in public life, and the old categories of liberal and conservative, are increasingly in flux—and when the spirituality boom of the late twentieth century reverberates as loudly as ever—Schmidt’s book offers a clear voice in defense of the Spiritual Left, and thereby an avenue for enlarging our historical understanding and our contemporary politics. One can only hope it receives a wide audience both inside and outside the academy.

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Citation: Matt Hedstrom. Review of Schmidt, Leigh Eric, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah*. H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews. September, 2007.

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