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Mark Hulsether. *Religion, Culture, and Politics in the Twentieth-Century United States.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 249 pp. $25.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-14403-2.

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Religious Road Trip

There could scarcely be a better time to publish a book on American religion, culture, and politics. In recent months Mitt Romney fought to position his Mormon faith in the American mainstream and simultaneously argued that religion should play a significant role in national life. Barack Obama has had to deny that he is a Muslim and has also denounced his former pastor, the black liberationist Jeremiah Wright. John McCain has courted and then renounced religious-right ministers John Hagee and Rod Parsley. Every major presidential candidate has emphasized the importance of religious faith in general, while simultaneous dodging or denying associations with particular religious groups and leaders. Americans apparently want their politicians to embrace both God and Country, as long as they do not take any particular god too seriously. This is American civil religion at its best (or worst). It is into this complicated context that Mark Hulsether has ventured.

Religion, Culture and Politics in the Twentieth-Century United States is an excellent introduction to the major movements in modern American religion. It draws on the best scholarship in American religion to focus on how particular movements interact and engage with each other and the broader American society. Hulsether's goal is to provide a concise introduction to American religion and to "relate religion to issues of cultural recognition and sociopolitical power" (p. 1). He also hopes to demonstrate "how religion is part of struggles for cultural hegemony that are at the center of discussions in American Studies and cultural studies" (p. 8). The narrative therefore revolves around issues of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Ultimately, Hulsether argues that scholars (and the people they study) need to move beyond two major approaches that have most often characterized discussions of U.S. religion. The first, advocated by religious conservatives, seeks a society with shared moral values. In this framework, minority ideas and beliefs are most often marginalized. The second approach, championed by religious liberals, celebrates diversity and pluralism. However, this methodology often disintegrates once advocates begin to think seriously about the construction of a supposedly level playing field. This is particularly difficult since some groups prefer "empowering alternative communities to disrupt and renegotiate forms of harmony that exclude or devalue them" (p. 238) rather than celebrating a superficial unity in diversity. Hulsether demonstrates that the consensus model of the conservatives is misguided while the pluralist vision of the liberals is inherently self-defeating.

Instead, Hulsether argues for a third approach. He seeks to frame the interplay among religion, culture, and politics in terms of "hegemonic and counter-hegemonic goals," which "can encompass the other two frames and clarify their strengths and weaknesses." (p. 238). "At times it is better to focus directly on the hegemonies and counter-hegemonies involved in specific cases of lived religion," he argues, "as opposed to beginning from concerns with building consensus or celebrating diversity" (p. 239). To demonstrate this approach, Hulsether highlights the actions and ideas of many different groups and shows how they contribute to cultural hegemony, challenge hegemony, and in many cases, do both simultaneously.

Religion, Culture and Politics in the Twentieth-Century United States opens with a lengthy discussion of the major American religious groups and sub-groups from the pre-contact era to the present. The rest of the book, divided between the pre- and post-World War II eras, discusses specific movements, case studies, and examples of religion interacting in the public sphere. The strength of the book is Hulsether's ability to make religion central to understanding American culture; he shows how the two are mutually constitutive. However, despite the promise of the book's title, this study is not so much about politics

as it is about culture. Hulsether spends far more time explaining religious practices and what they reflect about the interaction between religious groups and the broader society than looking at more traditional intersections between religion and politics. For example, issues such as the role of religion in the 1928, 1960, and 1980 presidential elections receive no more than passing mention, if any at all, while events like Italian Harlem's *festas* and debates over film censorship merit pages of careful analysis. In addition, the book is so movement-focused that individual personalities get short shrift. Although we learn the names of Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jerry Falwell, there is little insight into what motivated individual leaders like them. Instead, readers encounter one group after another after another.

Hulsether's intended audience is college undergraduates. To his credit, he is very careful to define all of his terms. But in his effort to engage students who have little prior knowledge of the book's content, he may have gone overboard. The book includes an introduction (the "Introduction"), then an introduction to pre-twentieth century religion (chapter 1), then introductions to each of the book's two major eras (chapters 2 and 5). Those students whom Hulsether most wants to reach may well have given up on the book before wading through three introductions to get to the rich intersections of religion, culture, and politics in the twentieth century. Hulsether is also extremely repetitive. Rarely do more than a handful of pages go by before he asks the reader to "recall" something that he has already said. Finally, in organizing his narrative, Hulsether uses an extended metaphor that runs throughout the book. He compares his study to a road trip in which travelers have to drive from New York to Seattle. How do you get from one place to the other? Where do you stop? What route do you follow? Where do you take your breaks and spend your nights? This certainly begins as an effective way for students to grasp the ways in which Hulsether's content is organized, and it makes for a very inviting introduction. However, by the end of the book this reader was tired of "recalling" how studying American religion relates to "our" (the entire book is written in plural pronouns) road trip. Hulsether's efforts to write for an undergraduate audience seemed to me to border on patronizing. Of course, I am not his intended audience. The students themselves will be the true judges of the success or failure of the long introductions, the repetition, and the metaphors. They may well enjoy them.

In sum, this is a very good overview of American religion and its interplay with the broader culture. I recommend it for classes with such a focus. I would not, however, use this book in a course that focuses on the role of religion in the traditional political sphere. Hulsether mostly circumvents traditional politics as he drives us from America's indigenous peoples to the intelligent design movement. Nevertheless, it is still a sweet ride.

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