



Charles H. Lippy, Eric P. Tranby. *Religion in Contemporary America*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013. ISBN 978-0-415-61737-6; ISBN 978-0-415-61738-3; ISBN 978-0-203-59111-6.

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C.H. Lippy u.a.: Religion in Contemporary America

The book at hand was conceived, according to the text on its sleeve, as “a fresh, engaging multi-disciplinary introduction to religion in contemporary America.” While an overview over the main tenets of religious belief systems has to be acquired elsewhere, this book aptly summarizes developments in the history and sociology of contemporary US religions. The authors also included interesting excerpts, charts and depictions from other works and refer readers to the preeminent – albeit almost exclusively US-American – studies on the respective topics discussed. Laudably, they provide short definitions of (most) scientific terms to help students navigate the sometimes complicated issues and academic discussions. The authors succeeded in producing a readable overview over the major religions, religious movements and religious trends in the United States since the 1950s.

“Religion in Contemporary America” is best described as a textbook and can be used as an exercise book. A paragraph at the beginning of every chapter outlines the ideas introduced in that chapter and bullet points enumerate the “main topics covered.” A similar section at the end of each chapter summarizes the topic in bullet point style and also lists a number of questions for discussion. The book is thus very accessible for students broaching the subject on their own. It might also be useful in teaching – despite the drawback that later chapters often refer to earlier ones. Thus, even though chapters are composed to stand alone, knowledge of an increasing number of terms is presupposed. The character of chapters as freestanding is enhanced by bibliographies attached to individual chapters. These lists are labeled “further reading” but point the reader to the studies from

which the information and arguments were drawn. Since a bibliography at the end is missing, readers have to go back to the individual chapters for bibliographical information.

The collaboration of Charles H. Lippy, emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and Eric Tranby, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Delaware, has assured that both historical and sociological approaches to the study of religion are presented. In a way that is traditional in introductions to religious studies, they start their book (part I, “Setting the Stage”) with an overview over different definitions and theories of religion, explaining the basic distinction between substantive and functional definitions of religion, and relating the ideas of major thinkers like Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim (chapt. 1). Next, they review newer ideas like secularization theory or economic theories of religion, pointing to both adherents and critics of these theories (chapt. 2). They add a very brief overview over the ways scholars have previously dealt with religion, sketching a picture of a former predominance with studies of institutions and traditions and a more recent turn to social and cultural history that opened the field to new topics and questions (chapt. 3). The brevity of this part necessarily gives short shrift to the complexity and details of different positions. Nonetheless, as a first glance at the field, Lippy’s and Tranby’s discussion is helpful.

The remaining three parts of the book are labeled “Mainline religions in historical and sociological context” (II), “Moving beyond the mainstream” (III), and “Where American religion is heading” (IV). The grouping of top-

ics under each heading, though, is rather puzzling. Especially parts two and three raise a number of questions. While the authors extend the term “mainline” – without making it explicit or explaining their reasons – to include Catholics and Jews, African-American religion is relegated “beyond the mainstream.” It is also striking that Islam, a topic of much public controversy since 9/11, does obviously not merit its own chapter (Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam are all briefly dealt with in a chapter on the – future – challenges of pluralism, chapt. 18).

Few clues are given as to why Lippy and Tranby chose this structure. The authors’ definition of “mainline” (p. 48) only refers to Protestantism – as is traditional. Why, then, Judaism and Catholicism are also treated in this section can only be inferred by the comment that they both had been established as part of “American society” by the 1950s Herberg, Will, Protestant – Catholic – Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology, Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1955. . Whether the authors consider evangelicals (chapt. 5) part of the mainline, as the structure of the book suggests, or a challenge to mainline Protestantism is not quite clear. They trace contemporary evangelicalism back to Fundamentalism, highlighting the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy of the 1920s that culminated in the so-called Scopes monkey trial. Following the argumentation of evangelical scholars like George Marsden, Lippy and Tranby see a “new style of evangelicalism” (p. 59) emerge in the 1960s that challenged both Fundamentalism and established (mainline?) Protestantism. In the same chapter, they also deal with Pentecostalism (pp. 70, 71) as yet another distinct religious movement. While their discussion of various religious traditions indicates the complexity of the US-American religious landscape and the difficulties with categorizing different religious expressions, the authors’ choice of structure does not help in resolving any confusion.

African-American religion is generally treated as a separate category by researchers. For one thing, Martin Luther King Jr.’s observation that “the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning” is still largely true. Furthermore polling data shows that for example white and black evangelical Christians, even though close in their religious convictions, differ in political outlook. Lippy and Tranby take

up issues surrounding African American religiosity in chapters eleven and twelve where they reiterate the history of the civil rights movement and how it shaped both African American Christianity and Islam. They further emphasize that religious segregation perpetuated racial segregation, inequality, and poverty. Moving from racial inequality to social marginalization, the authors next discuss new religious movements often labeled “sects or cults” (chapt. 13), using Scientology and Satanism as examples. They dedicate chapter fourteen to the Latter-day Saints who “began as a new religious movement, but have developed into a stable tradition” (p. 190). As mentioned earlier, while the structure of the book is strange, each chapter in itself is coherent, balanced, and informative.

The final section, part IV, “Where American religion is heading,” is more consistent, with chapters on the influence of spiritualism (chapt. 16) and pluralism (chapt. 18) on the religious landscape, and developments within religious thought (chapt. 17). In the last chapter (19), the question was taken up whether “America” was a “Christian nation.” Drawing on a study by political scientist Hugh Heclo, the authors point out that there were different approaches to that question. While historically Christianity dominated the US-American landscape and polling data suggested that the majority of US-Americans did consider themselves Christian and that this majority will likely prevail into the future, they also explained that if judged by Christian standards of “morality, doctrines, and behaviors” (p. 259) the United States are not a Christian nation. Moreover, polling data they cite suggests that the peak of people adhering to the notion of a “Christian America” was already crossed in 2005. Towards the end of the book they formulate the optimistic hope that “as religious pluralism increases, tolerance is also likely to increase” (p. 263). The challenge for future scholars, then, would be to find out “just what binds a diverse people into a single nation” (p. 264).

“Religion in Contemporary America” is solid work, even if awkwardly structured. The authors incorporate in one book introductory texts to a wide range of diverse and complex religious traditions and developments. The book can be recommended as an overview over and first approach to the study of the contemporary religious landscape of the United States.

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