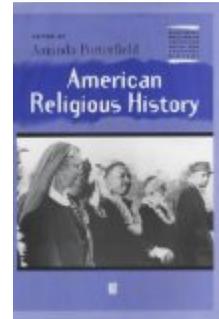


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Amanda Porterfield, ed. *American Religious History*. Malden, Mass. and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. xiv + 338 pp. \$46.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-631-22322-1; \$119.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-631-22321-4.

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Religious Diversity, Religious Freedom

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American Religious History is a collection of secondary and primary source documents designed to be used in a course of the same title, or perhaps in a more general survey of United States history. Porterfield has pulled together a diverse, intelligent selection which will allow professors and students plenty of latitude for exploration, discussion, and learning. She has chosen breadth of coverage over depth in any particular faith tradition and so her document selections range widely across the religious spectrum.

The book opens with an essay by the editor highlighting the foundational elements of American religious history. Porterfield unpacks four: religious freedom, individual experience, family life, and social reform. These intertwining aspects of our religious heritage build on one another and account for nearly all of the innovation, conservatism, and argument present in the various religious traditions of the United States. A persuasive, well-written essay, this provides the overarching themes which guided the choice of documents and can serve as a foil against which to compare other synthetic arguments.

Part 1 includes nine historical essays, each roughly twenty pages in length. Perry Miller's "Errand into the Wilderness" is followed by essays dealing with shouting Methodists, establishment Protestantism, gender ideals in fundamentalism, Catholic survival strategies, the development of conservative Judaism, the introduction

of Buddhism, and gender conflicts for black Muslim women. The most general is Albanese's essay on diversity and syncretism, "Exchanging Selves, Exchanging Souls: Contact, Combination, and American Religious History." Otherwise, each piece is a highly specific essay devoted to a topic of importance to an individual tradition. Jay Dolan's essay on Catholicism, for example, addresses Catholic efforts to adjust to the progressive individualism of American culture, a crucial issue for American Catholics. Porterfield appears to have made the assumption that other sources will provide the links to tie these detailed pieces together, for only Albanese's essay addresses broad themes that cover two or three hundred years and several religious traditions. This is not a complaint, just an observation on what the book does and does not do. The essays provide a series of opportunities to dive headlong into the depth and complexity of specific historical developments. The reader will need to turn elsewhere for synthesis, narrative, and thematic development.

This is an excellent group of historical essays. I dissent from only one selection, Simmons's essay "Striving for Muslim Women's Human Rights." Most of the essay is written in the first person and reflects upon the author's personal journey of faith and political activism. While this makes for a great read and is sure to confront many religious and social assumptions for students, I might have considered it as a primary source, perhaps in place of the selection by Malcolm X.

The thirty-four primary source documents complement the historical essay, but I would like to see more of them. Porterfield's selections lay out the Puritan foundation well, with five indisputably important—if predictable—authors: Winthrop, Hutchinson, Williams, Bradstreet, and Edwards. As I read this, I wondered about other religious traditions and about the nature of religious freedom. About half the colonies had some element of utopian thought directing their founding; should this be included? Would it be good to include an early Maryland law on religious toleration? That would certainly be an eye-opener for students with fixed, modern assumptions about the meaning of “religious freedom.”

The Revolutionary period is thinly represented by a selection from Jefferson and one from an Iroquois leader, Handsome Lake, despite the fact that these were foundational years for two of the most powerful religious influences in American history, Methodism (Francis Asbury) and Catholicism (John Carroll).

The tumult of the nineteenth century gets better press, with selections from Finney, Jarena Lee, Emerson, and Dickinson. Porterfield could not include everything, but I did miss the immigrant stories and some representation from the slave quarters, both of which could add diversity and depth. Abolitionists and women's rights advocates were often intensely religious people, as well, and since reform was one of Porterfield's major themes some mention of these seems appropriate. Selections from the later nineteenth century include Brownson (Catholic), Pratt (Latter-Day Saints), Wise (Jewish), and Eddy (Christian Science).

Twentieth-century documents address the liberal/conservative split, Catholic and Jewish developments, American Indian influences, spiritual arguments in the Civil Rights Movement, and the multiple challenges of feminism. The book closes with a selection by Ralph Reed. Porterfield covers more of this century than the others, but this was also a busy century filled with important changes, many of which did not make the cut. Pentecostalism was left out, as was the spirituality of the environmental movement; Vatican II was just touched on. Nonetheless, Porterfield captures the energy and fragmentation of this century better than the previous two.

With such a competitive, energetic history, more documents could always be included. The goal in such a book, though, is not to be thorough; the goal is to provide avenues for students to explore those four foundational elements the editor mentioned in her introduction: religious freedom, individual experience, family life, and social reform. Of these four, religious freedom and individual experience are represented the best, while social reform and family life both take a back seat.

I enjoyed reading this book; I found the selections interesting and challenging and I believe students would as well. Porterfield has written her introductions to each selection fairly and with integrity. With this topic bigotry is so easy, yet she models a very professional entrance into the world of the believer. This is a fine reader, with the potential to raise important questions about both religious history and personal belief.

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