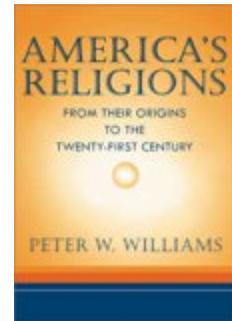


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Peter W. Williams. *America's Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-First Century*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001. xvi + 601 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-06682-5.

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Religion and the American Circumstance

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The previous generation of American religious historians like Winthrop Hudson and Sydney Ahlstrom had it easy. Sidestepping the morass of religious pluralism, they told of “the Great Puritan Epoch” which served as the basis for a compelling narrative clearly told. They had it easy because they did not have to deal with the demands of multiculturalism. The dominant story sufficed. According to this general perspective, America was made up primarily of the great churches of the Reformation, and all religious “outsiders” were expected to conform to broad Protestant norms. Williams writes that “religion” in this vein meant “white, middle-class, English-speaking, evangelical Protestants, especially those of Calvinist lineage—Congregationalists, Presbyterians, American Baptists, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, and low-church Episcopelians” (p. 1). Perhaps Williams overstates his point here, but the general claim remains true—through the 1950s American religious history was primarily the story of the Puritans and their successive cultural development throughout North America.

Such a monochromatic story is no longer adequate. Since the 1950s, scholars of American religion have uncovered a host of rich colors previously covered up by the mid-century Puritan-centric Protestant synthesis. In the introduction to *America's Religions*, Williams aptly summarizes a vast literature which has placed more closely to the center Roman Catholics, immigrants, African Americans, women, and adherents to minority religious tra-

ditions (Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism each get their own chapter). In addition, newer studies which emphasize popular or “lived” religion, anthropological methods, regional variances, and analyses based on race, class and gender have challenged the older synthesis.

Given the vast variety of American religious communities, Williams asks, “Is it still possible to present a narrative account of the religious life of the people of the United States as a whole? Or shall we, in postmodern fashion, regard each locus of individual or group religious experience as an equally valid and useful entre into understanding something about the American religious scene, while making no claims to seeing a whole which most likely does not even exist” (p. 3)? Williams attempts to avoid both extremes by recognizing both the unique character of each religious community and the commonalities they share. Instead of focusing on one group as the paradigmatic American story, he centers his discussion around American “themes” or “circumstances”: immigration, British culture, slavery and race, democracy, capitalism, nationalism, pluralism and Americanization. By discussing how various groups interact with these basic themes, Williams hopes to provide a coherent survey of American religion.

This book is massive. Originally published by Macmillan in 1989 and republished by the University of Illinois Press in 1998 as *America's Religions: Traditions and Cultures*, it includes over five hundred pages of textbig pages with over five hundred words per page.

Several sections have been added to address more actively groups outside of the Christian tradition. The book ends with a detailed fifty-six-page bibliography which is itself worth the purchase price of the book. The book is well written, and Williams is fair and comprehensive in his treatment of American religions. His account is impressive in its scope and erudition. One hundred pages go by before there is any mention of English colonization of North America. In that space the reader is introduced to Native American religions, African-American religious thought, Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the traditions stemming from the Protestant Reformation. While all the traditions in that list receive mention, by far the majority of the book is dedicated to Protestantism in the United States; and while Williams discusses Protestantism among ethnic minorities, most of the book discusses developments within Anglo-Saxon Protestantism.

While some general readers may purchase *America's Religions*, it is intended to be a textbook for beginning undergraduates interested in religion in the United States. Its breadth provides an excellent survey of the field, but its encyclopedic qualities lack a synthesis or compelling narrative which would make such an introductory text more beneficial. But, this is the trade-off Williams has to make. In place of the older generation's histories which focus on Protestantism, he has written a book which tries to not to privilege one religion over another. The result is a well-written and expertly-researched book which lacks a coherent story line. It is difficult to criticize Williams for this, for when one leaves the Puritan synthesis, where is one supposed to turn for coherence?

Williams's predicament is the same one faced by the authors of World History surveys. These books often become simply the older Western Civilization texts with a few extra chapters tacked on: a couple on Latin America, a few on Asia and perhaps one or two on Africa. World History texts often try to tell the whole story, and in the process never provide narrative and interpretive handles which allow students to make sense of an exceedingly complex collection of stories. Most historians agree that

knowledge beyond Western Civilization is important, but when the time-honored themes of western history are no longer at the center, they struggle to tell a clear story. In the same way, Williams's book reads at times like a "History of Protestant America" text with additional chapters added on. To be fair, these chapters are numerous (about twenty of the book's fifty-five chapters) and are thus not simply thrown in to appease advocates of multiculturalism. What is missing, not just here but in the field of American religious history more broadly, is an account of American religion which integrates the various traditions into a coherent narrative. Williams is not writing American history primarily, but religious history; as a result, he discusses the various groups in tradition-specific chapters (in the chapters covering the twentieth century, Jews, Roman Catholics, Hispanics, African Americans, Islam and other Asian religions each get their own chapter) which provide good introductions to the various religious communities but do not integrate them clearly into a broader American narrative. But, it is easy to criticize on this point and hard to construct a new kind of history that integrates the lessons of cultural pluralism into a neat and tidy narrative. Put differently, Williams's *America's Religions* suffers from the same difficulties our current culture does more generally: What is at the center of American life and what is at the periphery? Who determines?

Teachers of American religious history should seriously consider Williams's text for use in their classes. It is thorough and comprehensive. With the help of a professor who assists students in navigating the complex landscape of American religious life presented in its pages, students will benefit from it greatly—and so will their professors.

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