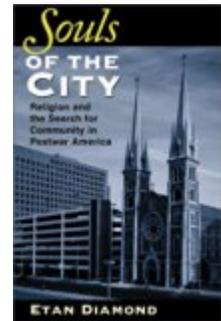


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Etan Diamond. *Souls of the City: Religion and the Search for Community in Postwar America*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. xii + 199 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34256-0.

Reviewed by Robert Whaples (Department of Economics, Wake Forest University)
Published on H-Catholic (March, 2004)



Competing for Souls in the City

Competing for Souls in the City

One question about religion in postwar America intrigues me as a social scientist (and former atheist): why does the United States still “have religion,” while most other economically developed countries do not? For example, in 2002 the Pew Global Attitudes Project found that 59 percent of those surveyed in the United States reported that religion plays a “very important” role in their lives. The rate in other rich countries, including Britain (33 percent), Canada (30 percent), Italy (27 percent), Germany (21 percent), Japan (12 percent), and France (11 percent), is only a fraction of the American level. This self-assessed importance is put into action. The World Values Survey of 1990 found that 58 percent of Americans attend church at least once a month, a rate that far exceeds other wealthy nations. Therefore, I read Etan Diamond’s book in hopes of understanding how religion has continued to flourish in the United States, even though it has withered in the old countries.

Diamond examines the post-World War II experience in Indianapolis, which he argues (correctly I think) is far more representative of the American metropolitan experience than more familiar settings like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. After briefly reviewing Indianapolis’s urban and religious history, he even-handedly explores four issues—suburbanization and the founding of new suburban congregations, the experience of previously rural congregations as the suburbs engulfed them, developments in the inner city, and the consolidation of

Indianapolis’s county into a single metropolitan governmental unit and this development’s impact on the city’s religious landscape. Diamond’s sources include personal interviews, newspapers, census data, and a substantial collection of church histories and documents. Throughout the volume he successfully relates the experiences of Indianapolis to the wider world and the broader literature. His focus is mainly on Protestant churches, though he does touch on Catholic and Jewish congregations, as well.

Diamond concludes that “as people have negotiated the various secular changes in the metropolis, they have consistently looked to the religious congregation as a place of community rootedness” (p. 166), but also that “the communities being built in congregations often have very little to do with particular local spaces” (p. 167). Instead, “People choose the place where they worship as much as they choose where to work or shop,” and “the fact that people travel across the city to attend a particular worship service suggests that religion is highly relevant to individual lives” (p. 171). Diamond makes his case well.

How does this study answer the broader question about the continued vitality of religion in America? One clue comes in the chapter on how churches moved into newly created suburbs. Many church leaders around the nation recommended cooperation and coordinated planning in building these new churches, embracing the concept of “comity.” The idea was that “competition among

denominations and churches was detrimental to religion as a whole. It was unseemly for churches to market themselves in an aggressive manner and to 'steal' members from other churches." Diamond quotes one church official who asserted that "the conduct of churches toward each other ought to be on an ethical plane quite above the level of competitive supermarkets" (p. 25). However, the comity approach never worked out. The coordination never really got off the ground. Churches knew that they needed to act with haste in selecting the best sites in new neighborhoods or they would have to build in inferior locations, away from traffic flows. Likewise, independent denominations and more conservative Protestant denominations understood that the idea of coordination was partly a tool of Mainline Protestant denominations to shut out their rivals. The bottom line is that the comity approach never had any chance of working. There was no mechanism by which a group of churches could effectively block market entry—although there were rare attempts at this through zoning. Just as important was how most churches measured success. They could not, of course, directly measure their true bottom line—the number of souls saved. Instead, as Diamond explains, "to many consultants and denominational officials and even to pastors and lay leaders, success equaled growth" (p. 88).

In the end, churches marketed themselves in ways very similar to supermarkets. What did competition among supermarkets bring? Was it adulterated products and high prices? Hardly. This competition brought attractive stores at convenient locations offering a wide range of products and innovative practices that drove down costs, with the savings passed along to customers in the form of lower prices.[1] It seems that the competition brought something similar to the religious marketplace—attractive churches in convenient locations

offering a range of doctrines and worship styles. Perhaps this competition helped hold down the "cost" of attending church and even increased the "demand" for religion among those desiring nearness to God, community, or just something to do. If you believe that there is one correct way to worship God (and many of us do), these developments are not necessarily good and this (rather than self-interest) may have been the point of those pushing comity. Competition may have undermined the market position of the church (or churches) worshipping in the "correct" way. On the other hand, if you believe that the greater danger is in people ignoring God altogether, these developments are not a bad thing at all.

Recent international research shows a discernible link between religious activity and "competition." For example, using multivariate regressions Robert Barro and Rachel McCleary find that even crude measures of religious pluralism are strongly and positively correlated with church attendance and that religious pluralism is one of the important factors in explaining why Americans are more religious than others.[2] Perhaps America's religious supermarkets are selling their customers a diet of religious junk food. Perhaps Americans would be spiritually starved otherwise? Though it is not its sole purpose, Etan Diamond's study captures much of the irrepressibility of this competition for souls in the city.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Stephen A. Brown, *Revolution at the Checkout Counter: The Explosion of the Bar Code* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[2]. Robert Barro and Rachel McCleary, "International Determinants of Religiosity," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 10147, www.nber.org/papers/w10147.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic>

Citation: Robert Whaples. Review of Diamond, Etan, *Souls of the City: Religion and the Search for Community in Postwar America*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. March, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9099>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.