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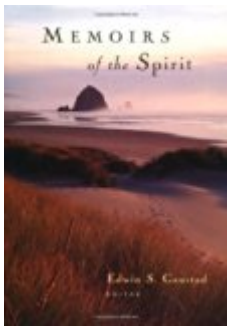

Edwin S. Gaustad, ed.. *Memoirs of the Spirit.* Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999. xix + 356 pp. $26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8028-3867-4.

Reviewed by John Kloos

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Mark Twain's formula for autobiography is to start anywhere in life and wander freely. Once interest flags, turn to a new fancy. Leave the facts, the boring detail, to someone else. Learning this in the introduction (and despite the historical order) I read these American religious memoirs along the lines of Twain's idea: I wandered, following interests, and found the twenty-six selections stimulating; the profiles adequate cover for the principal facts in the lives. These pieces would no doubt sustain undergraduate interest; for a seasoned teacher they would serve a course.

So many memories range vastly. Poet Maya Angelou's recount of a 1930s tent revival, perhaps the best in written words, led me to read more about caged birds singing. Mormon Justice, as recalled by Virginia Sorensen, emerged after the one whose property was taken attended in silence the funeral of the water thief he had slain. The community, including the author's mother (who scolded her for a morbid joke about buying a new shovel), defended the act.

Opening with "Captive" Mary Rowlandson, the texts are just over one quarter Anglo-Saxon Protestant male. The West is well represented ("Minority Student" Richard Rodriguez closes the book with reminiscences of Catholic education); the establishment is present (Billy Graham, Jimmy Carter, Jonathan Edwards). One group meets another; it recurs, as does the convert encountering persuasive new ways of being (Richard Allen, Peter Cartwright,Dorothy Day). In these selections, spirit writing echoes, multiplies, and becomes more than the stories of peoples encountering each other. Americans remember within their own person significant changes of mind or heart (Orestes Brownson, Black Elk, whose Christian turn is alluded to in his profile, Thomas Merton, Alan Watts, "Witness" Barbara G. Harrison -- the only author to renounce entirely her religious past). American memoirs cross-pollinate one tradition by another. Yogi Yogananda cites Isaiah. Russian Jewish immigrant Mary Anton led her public school class in "The Lord's Prayer," learning later from a student that it was a "Christian prayer." Anton's beatifying of George Washington may be the most movingly patriotic memorial in

the book (though the selection on "Patriot" Benjamin Rush is a personal favorite.)

When worlds collide, disjunction remains and humor helps the realignment, as with the joke of *Time* magazine on why Baptist educator Benjamin E. Mays had not converted his Methodist wife. For what he viewed as an impossible task, Mays was acclaimed a "religious liberal." Mays also recalls a more serious collision of worlds: where would he as a highly esteemed black leader sit to welcome President Truman -- stage or gallery? The logistics got fixed, but the embarrassment -- no, the offense -- was not reconciled until confessed in this selection from 1971.

In selecting memories, Edwin Gaustad reflects on meaning. Not specifically religious, what makes for spirit writing is repetition, not unlike "Theologian" Reinhold Niebuhr complaining about saying the same thing again and again. Alfred Kazin's enveloping religion is a turning to the place always already there where we feel most at home (p. xvii). It would have bored Twain to stay in one place, but the historian explores what it means to repeat memories in a short, jargon-free introduction that is full of insight. Reading perennial themes takes one deeper into American refrains of old worlds, new places of hopes, convictions, and dreams. Brownson and Anton seek to build a noble and true national character, others believe the first mission is building group pride (Isaac Mayer Wise). Home can be where we fight over what we believe. "Polemicist" Harry Emerson Fosdick took on enemies of the faith in modern times.

What is American about these memories is how many different versions of home are remembered. It is clear that home means acceptance, independence, freedom, loyalty, joy (as in the sad lyrics, but joyful tune of Holy Rollers "having their heaven right here on earth" [pp. 324-25]). Home, an emotion word, points to places of love, learning, leaving, and even flying -- as visionary Black Elk soared over people he wished to save -- people who were themselves praying, dancing, weeping. Home is Edwards's delight, and it is also a place of disappointment, anger, sadness, fear, sorrow, and despair. People should be treated fairly, and home is where justice is. "The Slave" Frederick Douglass, suspicious of Christianity, calls Americans to conscience. Perhaps the best claims are also prophetic; in this volume, they center on race, and they are by Bishop Allen and John LaFarge, S.J.

I shall not critique the selection. Gaustad arranged his favorites; of memories, this is acceptable. The sweep of memory returns, over and over, to the meaning of America, a culture that, resisting definitions, takes shape in books like these. After historical, social, and personal lines, refrains, converging, hint at a possible human unity more mythic than historic. In living, these people chose, drew lines, shaped verses, until something deep down became remembered, and then called up again in our reading. The editor's selection is not responsible for this. Spirit writing, being personal, seems to make this automatic.

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