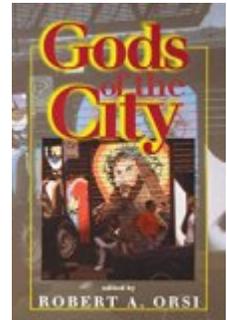


**Robert A Orsi, ed..** *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape.*  
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*Gods of the City* is part of a series on Religion in North America, edited by two prominent historians of religion in America, Catherine L. Albanese and Stephen J. Stein. The editor of this book of essays, Robert A. Orsi, is also well known in the same field, but there is more of an interdisciplinary mix with the other contributors. The focus on religion highlights a dimension of city life that often does not get much attention in American urban history. This impressive new collection forcefully shows us that, rather than declining in the face of industrialization, urbanization, and technological change (as many once had thought), religion instead has remained vital and persistent throughout.

Three essays focus on suburban Washington, D.C., Miami, and Seattle, respectively, but there is a particular emphasis on New York City (seven of ten essays). This imbalance is not addressed and may be unintentional, but "the City" to which the book's title mainly refers is New York.

Orsi's introduction ranges more widely and is quite a tour de force at sixty-three pages (with fifteen thick additional pages of footnotes). An ex-

tended meditation on religion and the city in American history, it is perhaps the most valuable part of the book. Explaining how revivalists and reformers of the nineteenth century had constructed a "normative fiction of small-town virtue" (p. 18) and contrasted this with negative images of the city and those who inhabit it, Orsi goes on to outline many of the ways different religious groups have navigated American urban terrain. In fact, he says, "the truth is that much of what is characteristic of modern American religion has developed in cities" (p. 43). Taking this further, Orsi states that urban religion "is what comes from the dynamic engagement of religious traditions (by which I mean constellations of practices, values, and beliefs, inherited and improvised, in ongoing exchanges among generations and in engagement with changing social, cultural, and intellectual contexts) with specific features of the industrial and post-industrial cityscapes and with the social conditions of city life. The results are distinctly and specifically urban forms of religious practice, experience, and understanding" (p. 43).

In another essay, Orsi revisits Italian Harlem to build on material from *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Extending his study to 1990 to bring Puerto Ricans and Haitians into the mix, he describes how the former came to feel excluded from the annual festa while the latter was welcomed into it. The situation is a little different in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, an Italian and Puerto Rican neighborhood about which folklorist Joseph Sciorra weaves a well-crafted and nuanced ethnography on religious processions as ethnic and territorial markers. Sciorra captured the neighborhood in history just as it started becoming a hip, lower-rent alternative to young bohemians from Manhattan. This may explain why he does not focus on them in his story (and it helps the other two groups stand out more), but one wonders if gentrification will erode local tradition or if these other "newcomers" will join in too.

Other essays continue the tour of New York. Distilling elements from her ethnography, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown homes in on a Haitian woman's sacramental apartment adaptations (carefully hidden from potentially intolerant non-Haitians) while also stressing certain transnational aspects of this transplanted tradition. Art historian David H. Brown sheds light on Vodou's Afro-Cuban cousin, Santeria, with a lengthy account of the religion that moves from Cuba to Miami, New York, and Union City, New Jersey. Both essays help demystify these often misunderstood faiths, both of which are syncretic religions created when west African slaves and their descendants on these islands eventually merged their conception of orichas, or orishas, with Catholic saints that represented similar traits (also compare Obeah in Jamaica, Brujeria in the Dominican Republic, and Candomble in Brazil). Jack Kugelmass explores age and dying in urban American Orthodox Judaism by catching up with the neighborhood rab-

bi and friends he wrote about in *The Miracle of Intervale Avenue: The Story of a Jewish Congregation in the South Bronx* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986). Wayne Ashley takes us to the northern part of the Lower East Side known since the 1960s as the East Village to describe how a Catholic parish in a multiethnic neighborhood has battled problem areas within its borders by enacting an annual outdoor Stations of the Cross procession at strategic locations of the neighborhood. Taking us back in time, Diane Winston traces the evolution of the bell-ringing uniformed women who tend the annual Christmas kettles of change in commercial areas across America. Relating the remarkable story of how this British import came to America with a militant mission to sacralize secular city space, Winston's essay also stems from a recent book, *Red-Hot and Righteous: The Urban Religion of The Salvation Army* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

Outside of New York, Hinduism scholar Joanne Punzo Waghorne covers the construction and consecration of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple in suburban Washington, D.C. and notes the differences and adaptations from temple building in suburban Madras, India. Thomas A. Tweed examines the other side of Cuban religiosity (that officially rejects, yet cannot shake belief in, Santeria) by exploring the power that a Catholic shrine has over the local community in South Florida's Little Havana. Tweed's essay comes from his recent book, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). And on the west coast, Madeline Duntley analyzes how a Japanese Presbyterian church dating back to 1907 in Seattle has dealt with heritage, ritual, and translation through successive generations and congregations.

Besides the book's title and themes, there is one other striking similarity among the essays: they each refer at some point or another to the work of Yi-Fu Tuan, the influential scholar of hu-

manistic geography. Cited here mostly for his attention to space and place, Tuan's ideas seem to guide so many of the essayists' fundamental thoughts about their subjects that he almost becomes a theme himself. [note: see the recent cover story on Tuan in the March 16, 2001 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.]

A few notable early sociologists and historians treated religion in their work, but the last time a title like *Gods of the City* came out was back in the heyday of the "ethnic revival" among social historians of the 1960s and 1970s. To see how things have changed, see Randall M. Miller and Thomas D. Marzick, eds., *Immigrants and Religion in Urban America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977). The focus then on studies of European immigrants has shifted in recent years to include new immigrant groups--reflecting dramatic changes in the religious and ethnic landscape of the country brought about by more open immigration policies since 1965. Indeed, it seems we may be witnessing a "new ethnic revival" in these kinds of studies now.

*Gods of the City* has already found its way into syllabi and bibliographies, and the eleven essays here offer an important reexamination of the topic. For geographical variety and more in this vein, see another recent text edited by sociologists R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner, *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998). Also explore the multimedia CD-ROM by Diana L. Eck and the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, *On Common Ground: World Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

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