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Amanda Porterfield and John Corrigan, eds.,  
*Religion in American History.*

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## REFERENCES

Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2010. Pp. 345. ISBN 978-1405161381.

<sup>1</sup> This book offers an overview of the intertwining links between religion and American history, by following both a thematic and a chronological approach. The resulting kaleidoscope is a condensed introduction of religion in American history. It perfects the approach chosen by Philip Goff and Paul Harvey who had eleven themes followed in seven periods in their 2004 collection *Themes in Religion and American Culture*.

<sup>2</sup> For this book leading scholars in history and religion, Amanda Porterfield and John Corrigan, recruited sixteen authors mostly from religious studies departments throughout the United States to describe four themes (politics, cosmology, community, and practice) in four eras. The first period includes the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the age of exploration and encounter between Europeans and native peoples. They mark this period by the Salem witchcraft trials which ended the phase of main European religious transplants. The second period covers the eighteenth century. In the context of the Atlantic world a distinctive American religiosity emerged, blending revivals, missions, rationalism, and African and Caribbean innovations into new collective identities. In the third era, the nineteenth century, the westward movement added new dynamics to the religious traditions. Mobility spurred the identification of religion and nation, and also provided sufficient space to assuage growing religious differences. The internationalization of American religion is the story

of the twentieth century. This four-by-four strategy leaves the reader to follow either a synchronic or a diachronic course.

3 The essays on politics mainly deal with the tension between worldly authority and religious matters. The contributions on cosmology collect the various coherent constructions of the cosmos and the place of the individual. They include native American concepts and also offer a great diversity of contemporary ideas. The essays on community describe fellowship and boundaries between groups and individuals, while the chapters on practice cover the actual activities of believers.

4 The introduction of the book states that religion is woven into the fabric of American history as a force for good and/or for evil. This statement keeps thinking about religion open-ended. The risk of such an open definition is that everything might be included in "religion." That openness is a strength and a weakness. The strength is that the narratives highlight the religious aspects in the familiar sequence of American history and reveal the deeper currents. The conceptual weakness is that it blurs boundaries with other aspects.

5 The periodization is well chosen because it is marked by distinct events. The Salem witchcraft trials of 1692 are used to mark the anxiety about the spiritual purpose of the Puritan settlements. It is not treated as a separate incident, but a structural demarcation. The structural aspects include the fact that Protestantism was the pillar of the European empire. It also explains the lack of tolerance for dissenters in New England, which was less modern than England. Also the Catholic-Protestant strife loomed large over the American continent, as well as a strong suspicion of royalist power. The church in the US never served as a "national" institution in the way it did in Europe. Thanks to the weakness of religious institutions and the promise of individual fulfilment revivals could erupt. These episodes of religious enthusiasm further undermined the leading religious and civic authorities. The drive came from the connection with the expectation of the Antichrist (Millennialism) and a deep suspicion of power.

6 In the new republic, evangelical ideals were put into practice in a political activism, which emphasized self-discipline in order to frame personal liberty for the common good. These are examples of the maturity of religious studies as a discipline, which balances more general narratives with diversity.

7 The next period begins in 1803, when the Louisiana Purchase united various European traditions in a new republic with large continental growth capacity. The Spanish-American war in 1898 marked the age of expansion worldwide and the end of protestant domination. The nineteenth century reveals that citizens had a need for higher spiritual authority to support their position towards slavery. The war greatly increased the power of the central state, which led to a restoration of national unity, but religions did not incorporate Afro-Americans. They were sacrificed on the altar of the nation.

8 The essays are all of excellent quality and create coherence in a complex relationship thanks to the many cross-references and comparisons which help to understand the sources of conflict. Their playful style welcomes discussion. For Europeans it is crucial to get introduced into the spiritual world of native peoples and their appreciation of kinship, which contrast with the European attitudes to the position of the individual. A divine mandated authority for worldly rulers was underwritten more strictly in the Spanish colonies, where religious orders had great

power than in the colonies founded by Northern Europe. Throughout America's history, religion mediated politics and opened up new possibilities when the odds of politics changed.

<sup>9</sup> At the close of the twentieth century all four themes end in pluralism and fragmentation. The authors are clearly not part of the school of Philip Jenkins who claims a larger share of Christian tradition, due to immigration of Catholic Latinos and Christians from Asia and the Middle East. The effects of these demographical trends still lie in the future. The authors claim that a theology of personal experiential self-explication, a comfortable response promising comfort in a violent and chaotic world meanders through the apparent dichotomy of liberals and conservatives. The overview of contemporary practices ends with a view of a multi-directed, recycling missionary movement, the community section reveals an increasing global interaction, and the political implications are dark: without a core of beliefs and practices to sustain unity, it is hard to satisfactorily solve tensions between church and state. These necessarily tentative conclusions seem to point at a weakening of the meaning of religion for the American nation as a whole. This observation also questions the place of religion in modern America. Thanks to the detailed roadmap leading us through the twists and turns of religious history this book serves as an arsenal of arguments for a fruitful debate about a healthy relationship between religion and American society.

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