Religion in American History: A Brief Guide to Reading

The opening sixteen words of the first amendment to the Federal Constitution of 1789—"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof"—anticipated religion's centrality to American life in the coming centuries and reflected religion's complicated history in the British colonial era. Scholars have followed the evolving history of religion in America through excellent books based on superb and innovative research. These books graphically detail America's often powerful encounter with religion from the sixteenth through the early twenty-first centuries.


Colonial and Revolutionary America

When Americans have thought about religion among America's first European colonists, they often have thought of New England's Puritans, a practice probably guaranteed by Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous 1850 historical novel, The Scarlet Letter. Indeed, historians have written so frequently on the Puritans that Edmund S. Morgan has observed that we now know more about the them "than any sane person should want to know." Morgan himself is the author of several superb books on the Puritans, and one of his best, The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop (Boston: Little Brown, 1958), offers an exceptional account of Winthrop's strenuous effort to perfect his imperfect

Parris, 1653-1720 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), describes the sad life of the Salem minister who leveled the first accusations against Salem's alleged witches.


account of the Quakers' complex and influential road to anti-
slavery; and Jack D. Marietta, The Reformation of American
Quakerism, 1748-1783 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania
Press, 1984) describes how Pennsylvania Quakers shaped their
modern humanitarian identity through an internal reformation
before the Revolution.

Although the southern colonies were not known for their
piety, religion became important there nonetheless. Rhys Isaac's
The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790 (Chapel Hill:
University of North Carolina Press, 1982) describes an emerging
confrontation between Baptists and the Church of England in the
1760s that shaped both Virginia and the American Revolution. The
journals of the exceptionally observant Church of England
itinerant minister, Charles Woodmason, The Carolina Backcountry
on the Eve of the American Revolution, ed. Richard J. Hooker
(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), provide
a unique glimpse at religion in the southern backcountry, and
Christine Heyrman, Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible
Belt (New York, 1997) vividly explains south's Protestant
evangelical culture that emerged after the Revolution.

The most famous religious events of the colonial period
centered on the mid eighteenth-century revivals that later came
to be labeled the "Great Awakening." Frank Lambert's Inventing
the "Great Awakening" (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
1999) summarizes the best of what historians now know about the
revivals, and two superb biographies describe the revivals' major
progenitors. George Marsden's prize-winning Jonathan Edwards: A

Nineteenth-Century America


The often vexed issue of church and state is approached with great insight in Edwin S. Gaustad, Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land: A History of Church and State in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) and John Thomas Noonan's general history, The Lustre of Our Country: The American


**Twentieth Century America**

Many nineteenth-century American religious leaders despaired of religion's survival in the next century. They believed religion would never survive urbanization, industrialization, mass bureaucratization, and modern technological and scientific transformation because they thought religion thrived best in a simpler face-to-face agricultural society. These religious leaders would have been amazed, then, to read any of the three published volumes of Martin Marty's projected four volume series, *Modern American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986--), because each vividly conveys not only the survival of organized religion in twentieth-century American public and private life, but religion's prosperity and vitality.

Edward J. Larson's *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997) revises many myths about the infamous 1925 Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee that challenged the teaching of evolution in Tennessee's public schools. Two books imaginatively trace the origins and progress of conservative


Religion played more important roles in post-World War II politics than either contemporaries or historians were willing to acknowledge for some time. However, many recent books now describe religion's complex and often contradictory continuing engagement with politics in modern America. The writings of Martin Luther King illuminate religion's role in the civil rights crusade of the 1950s-1970s, and they are conveniently collected in Martin Luther King, I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper, 1992). Other excellent books include David J. Garrow, Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (New York: Vintage Books, 1986); Charles Marsh, God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Andrew Michael Manis, A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999).


Books about the two of most infamous American religious episodes of the late twentieth century--the November 1978 suicide and murder in Guyana of 900 California followers of Rev. Jim Jones's People's Temple and the April 1993 burning of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas--are almost as controversial as the events themselves, but they can get readers started on understanding the people and events involved. David Chidester's
Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the People’s Temple, and Jonestown (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), and James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher’s Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) elicit insight as well as argument on both events.


"New Age" religion already has received substantial scholarly attention. The best general history from the nineteenth century to the present is Catherine L. Albanese, Nature Religion in America from the Algonkian Indians to the New Age (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Two books by Sarah M. Pike, New Age and Neopagan Religions in America (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) and Earthly Bodies,


Several university presses have commissioned series that examine American religion and should be consulted for new publications. Among them are the Greenwood Press series,
Denominations in America; two series from Columbia University Press, the Columbia Contemporary American Religion Series and Religion and American Culture; the Oxford University Press series, Religion in America; and Religion in North America from Indiana University Press.