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Review: 'Under God: Religion and American Politics'

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Under God: Religion and American Politics. By Garry Wills. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990. 445 pages. \$24.95.

If this book were a painting, in the foreground would be some of the candidates from the 1988 presidential primaries, such as Pat Robertson, Jesse Jackson, George Bush, Michael Dukakis, and Gary Hart. In the immediate background would stand political and religious figures from United States history, such as William Jennings Bryan, Abraham Lincoln, Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. In the far background lurk influential figures from the history of Western civilization such as Luther, Aquinas, Augustine, Jesus, Aristotle, Plato, and Euripides.

Although the book is not a painting, it is indeed a work of art. It is a stunning portrait of the influence of religion on United States politics. It is an exercise in high journalism that blends reporting and story-telling with a deep level of insightful, even scholarly analysis.

The major theme that runs throughout this work is that religion has, does, and should play a major role in shaping the political landscape of the United States. Those who choose to ignore this will remain politically ignorant. At the same time, however, religion should not be tied to politics through state support. Wills argues for a strong separation of Church and state that will paradoxically strengthen the hand of religion in influencing public policy.

Wills demonstrates his theme through an analysis of the religious dimensions of the 1988 presidential primaries and election. Wills shows, for example, how Gary Hart, emerging from a strong religious background in the Church of the Nazarene, presented himself as operating out of the moral vacuum of "new ideas." With no appeal to the religious heritage of the United States he was at best an enigma to the public at large.

Wills' analysis of the contemporary landscape leads him into historical investigations of the relations between religion and politics in the United States. Along the way, he dispels many popular falsehoods, such as that William Jennings Bryan was a mindless literalist or that Thomas Jefferson privately opposed Christianity. His investigations are never mere digressions; at every point, he is true to his purpose. He shows, for example, how some of the issues of the Scopes monkey trial remain unresolved and influential in the current scene. He demonstrates how Jefferson and Madison's strong support for the separation of church and state never indicated even the slightest tendency toward thinking that religion has nothing to do with politics or that religious ideas should not hold powerful sway in the political sphere.

The reader is also treated to Wills' investigations and opinions concerning such issues as censorship and abortion. Throughout the work, his strong opinions are never far below the surface of his analysis. He is surprisingly solicitous of William Jennings Bryan, Jesse Jackson, and Mario Cuomo. He is particularly rough on Gary Hart, Pat Robertson, and Michael Dukakis. Of his own Catholic bishops, he seems supportive when it comes to economic and social issues, but notably critical when it comes to matters of sexual morality and gender roles. Often Wills displays sensitivity and even sympathy for positions with which he disagrees, excruciatingly trying to understand the history and background. One wonders why he does not seem to pay the bishops this courtesy.

This is an important book that belongs in all college libraries. It provides good reading for courses that deal with American religion and with religion and politics.

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DENNIS M. DOYLE

God, Death, Art and Love: The Philosophical Vision of Ingmar Bergman. By Robert E. Lauder. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1989. 198 pages. \$11.95.

Robert Lauder, a philosopher and close student of film—who has contributed to *The New York Times*, *America* and other periodicals—has long been deeply engaged by the hauntingly introspective movies of Ingmar Bergman. Considering the number of books on Bergman already available, Lauder's new study is an act of courage, but his philosophical concerns tend to produce reductionist interpretations, limiting his ability to explain why he responds so deeply to the movies he is discussing.

Beginning the book with a summary of his own philosophical realism was probably a tactical mistake, since it might allow hasty readers to conclude that his position is less nuanced and open-ended than it is. Though inappropriate as a text, *God, Death, Art and Love* is a readable reprise of the major films from *The Seventh Seal* to *Fanny and Alexander* which should prove of value to those unfamiliar with the literature on Bergman. Readers will be reminded of how the knight's tormented cry in the earlier film *Why Can't I Kill God Within Me?* seems to have been stilled in the later works, but the cataloguing of references to God, death, art, and love offers little fresh illumination. For example, Lauder correctly observes the importance of touch as a metaphor for love in such movies as *Winter Light* and *The Silence*, but when he concludes that "The only hope we have, according to Bergman, is human love," the effect is bathos.

Asking Bergman to provide a "philosophical vision" was probably always an unreasonable request. A more relevant question is why at least some of his movies remain enduring art. The fact that even scenes of despair can, as in *Winter Light*, hint at the reality of the sacred, needs sustained analysis that may have to go beyond Bergman's conscious intentions or ability to verbalize his "philosophy."

Cross Currents: Religion & Intellectual Life

JOSEPH CUNNEEN

Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters. Edited by Harold Coward. Faith Meets Faith Series. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990. xix + 281 pages. \$29.95 (paper \$14.95).

Based on a research project at Calgary University, Harold Coward has edited a helpful and useful collection of eighteen original essays with a foreword by Raimundo Panikkar. In Coward's words, "Hindu-Christian dialogue has had a long and checkered history." This book probes that history looking for insight to help the progress of the dialogue.

The collection is divided into three parts. Part I, "Historical Perspectives on Hindu-Christian Dialogue," includes six essays. Three are significant for their historical realism and critical insight. "The Response of the Hindu Renaissance