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Review: 'Religion in America Since 1945: A History'

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Religion in America Since 1945: A History. By Patrick Allitt. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 384 pp. \$30.00 cloth.

Anyone who has taught a course in U.S. religious history knows the daunting challenge of adequately dealing with the riotous diversity of religion in America. This challenge moves from daunting to nearly overwhelming when one gets to the years after World War II. But now comes along Patrick Allitt, professor of history at Emory University, who, in Religion in America Since 1945, has managed to create out of this apparent chaos a lucid, compelling narrative of recent U.S. religious history.

Of course, and as Allitt observes in his introduction, in order to “prevent the book from taking the form of a mere list or set of encyclopedia entries” he is forced to give only passing attention to “vast areas of American religious history” (xiii). Readers will be thankful that the author chose to be selective, as the result is a coherent, graceful account. It thus may be the worst sort of academic quibbling to suggest that the book could have benefited from more attention to mainline Protestantism (how the writing of American religious history has changed!), peace churches, and Native religions. But it is not quibbling to lament that there is almost nothing here on Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement (the latter does not even appear in the index), given that, as Grant Wacker and others have made clear, this may be the most important religious movement of the 20th century.

But there is so very much to like here. Allitt has an enviable knack for explaining intellectuals and their ideas in a few pithy paragraphs, as evinced by the sections on religious thinkers of the 1950s, the death of God theologians, and feminist/womanist theology. It is particularly impressive that he successfully weaves these ideas into a narrative that also includes fascinating discussions of the church building boom of the 1950s and 1960s, the impact of Vatican II, and the Jesus People. His chapter on the alternative religious worlds of the 1960s and 1970s is terrific, particularly his insightful comments on the cult-like anti-cult movement, and his sensitive discussion of Jim Jones and the Jonestown suicides. The conjunction of religion and violence returns as a theme in his chapter on the 1990s, where Allitt gives Ruby Ridge, the Branch Davidians, and Heaven's Gate the attention they deserve. And his treatment of the Religious Right, the televangelist scandals, and Promise Keepers is both accurate and fair.

As these topics indicate, and as readers of this journal will appreciate, Allitt spends much time on the intersection of religion and politics in the United States. In the process he argues that, while religious groups have often understood political issues "as matters of transcendent significance," they have been forced by "the nature of American church-state separation" to "*translate* [their] convictions into the secular language of the national good" (261, 262-63) This is an important observation. It would have been even better if he had noted that it is also the nature of our two-party political system, and the increasingly rancorous "culture war" rhetoric used by

partisans, that makes it appear that Christians are much more “sharply divided” between Left and Right than they really are.

Kudos to Patrick Allitt for Religion in America Since 1945. Scholars, teachers, and students of religion in contemporary America are the fortunate beneficiaries of his noteworthy achievement.

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