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Review: 'The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century'

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Matthew S. Hedstrom. *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2013. Pp. 278. \$55.00.

In 1915 Frank Laubach – having studied theology at Union Seminary before receiving his Ph.D. in sociology from Columbia – headed off to the Philippines to serve as a Congregational missionary to the Islamic Moro people. Having discarded the conservative theology of his Baptist youth, Laubach’s evangelistic passion was, to quote Matthew Hedstrom, “amplified by the intellectual and imperial swagger of pre-Great War liberalism” (p. 215). By 1930 Laubach realized he had failed, his Christian message poisoned by his sense of cultural superiority. Desperate to remake himself, he immersed himself in Christian contemplative literature. He also asked a local religious leader if they could study the Qur’an together. The result was a spiritual awakening in which Laubach replaced “the hubris of his early missionary zeal” with “the humbler mystic’s search for the presence of God,” all the while seeking to match the “submission to God he found in Islam” (p. 215). Over the next few decades Laubach not only wrote books on intercessory prayer, in which he emphasized resources to be found in various religious traditions, but he also became a global leader in literacy education.

Frank Laubach’s story – in its emphasis on the spiritual benefits of reading, mysticism, and interfaith encounters – serves as the perfect coda to Matthew Hedstrom’s terrific study of religious liberalism in twentieth-century America. *The Rise of Liberal Religion* joins an expanding corpus of work – most notably Gary Dorrien’s three volume *The Making of American Liberal Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, 2003, 2006) and Leigh Eric Schmidt’s *Restless Souls: The Making of American*

Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005)— that provides balance to the substantive scholarly attention recently given to conservative Protestantism. This scholarship suggests – and *The Rise of Liberal Religion* is explicit in this regard – that there is much more to the story of religious liberalism in 20th/21st century America than simply the numerical decline of mainline Protestant churches.

Hedstrom begins his account with the cultural crisis sparked by World War I. While conservative Protestants responded with a crusade against theological modernism and evolution, religious liberals developed a series of initiatives designed to promote the buying and reading of religious books. These campaigns – including Religious Book Week and the Religious Book Club – were conducted within the context of a middlebrow literary culture, in which experts recommended books and suggested how they should be read. Not surprisingly, the liberal elite promoted religious books that were in keeping with their commitment to the search for a universal religious experience, a search that was focused on mystical and psychological approaches to spirituality, and that included an ever-increasing openness to what might be learned from the religious world beyond Protestantism. The result was a “religious middlebrow culture [that] shaped spirituality [in America] by introducing previously marginal ideas about the nature of religious experience into the mainstream of popular thought and by preparing readers for a spiritual engagement with religious ‘others’” (p. 21).

World War II gave these commitments a powerful boost. In keeping with the newly-minted notion of America as a “Judeo-Christian nation,” and with the encouragement of the U. S. government, the National Conference of Christians and Jews established its own Religious Book Week to promote interfaith books during and after the

war. In a wonderful chapter on postwar religious reading Hedstrom takes direct aim at Will Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1955). While Herberg described and decried a postwar America awash in religious shallowness and doctrinal heterodoxy, Hedstrom uses three best-sellers by a Protestant (Harry Emerson Fosdick, *On Being a Real Person*), a Catholic (Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*), and a Jew (Joshua Loth Liebman, *Peace of Mind*) as evidence of a much more complex and rich religious story. In Hedstrom's reading, these books promoted not thin universalism – both Merton and Liebman were fierce advocates of their own traditions – but instead liberal cosmopolitanism. Moreover, these three books used modern psychology, mysticism, and other religious traditions to provide guidance for their readers (whose grateful letters to the authors reveal how much this assistance was welcomed).

For Herberg and many who followed after, such boundary-crossing, such de-emphasis on historic orthodoxies, such “middlebrowing of religion” indicated a lamentable secularization of American life. But with characteristic generosity Hedstrom demurs: “Rather than an evisceration of faith . . . the emerging spirituality fostered by mass-marketed books marked the culmination of decades of liberal religious efforts to craft forms of spirituality adequate to meet the challenges of modern life.” (p. 213) As variations of these “forms of spirituality” remain with us today, liberalism can legitimately claim cultural victory. While some may ask whether spirituality so profoundly shaped by consumer capitalism can really address our deepest needs, in 21st century America religious liberals are not the only ones who have to answer this question.

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