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# Review: 'What Would Jesus Read? Popular Religious Books and Everyday Life in Twentieth-Century America'

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Erin A. Smith. *What Would Jesus Read?: Popular Religious Books and Everyday Life in Twentieth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. Pp. xvi, 394. \$39.95.

In this interesting book Erin Smith analyzes popular religious books since the late nineteenth century with an eye toward understanding why – despite the scorn heaped on them by intellectuals -- they have been so beloved by their readers. Rather than being a comprehensive survey, *What Would Jesus Read?* consists of five case studies: the Social Gospel novels (1880s-1910s), Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925), post-World War II religious self-help books, Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), and books for “the seeker” from the past twenty-five years. Smith's focus is on white Protestant readers; working against the overworked liberal-conservative binary, she argues that these readers, who are “believed to be at opposite ends of the religious and political spectrum,” actually “share a culture of religious reading” (302) in which what really matters is “if these texts *worked* – that is, made them better people, managed their fears and anxieties, and made them feel as if their lives mattered” (7).

Smith is quite convincing in making the case that scholars in literary studies (and elsewhere) need to attend to these nonliterary ways of reading, focusing on what these texts do and not just on what they say. As she makes clear, not to do this is to render incomprehensible why large numbers of religious readers have loved books with obvious intellectual and stylistic shortcomings. Of course, it would seem that the best scholarship involves doing both, simultaneously seeing the ways in which readers use texts for their own purposes while also taking the content of the text seriously on its own terms.

In this regard, the weakest section of *What Would Jesus Read?* is the two chapters on *The Late Great Planet Earth*, the prophecy blockbuster that swept the evangelical subculture (and beyond) in the 1970s. Smith claims that – as evinced by the book’s appeal to the anti-establishment Jesus People -- Lindsay’s book “moved the center of Christian life from the institutional church to the individual believer” (233). But the move away from ecclesiastical institutions toward evangelical gurus and parachurch organizations has been ever-accelerating in American evangelicalism over the past century. Lindsay was not undermining religious authority; he was exercising it in recognizable evangelical fashion. Interestingly, his book reinforced the conservative political commitments of local evangelical churches in the 1970s, in the process serving as a bridge for Jesus People – who did (as Smith asserts) understand the book as a sort of “textbook” (212) -- to enter or re-enter conservative Protestantism, and from there into the Christian Right. It thus would have behooved Smith to attend to the Cold War politics undergirding *The Late Great Planet Earth*, in which Lindsay placed the Soviet Union in alliance with the forces of the Antichrist. Smith rightly notes that many readers found the book to be therapeutic – it certainly makes one feel better to know that you are on the right side of history, and your enemies will be slaughtered – but the point that they were able to use this astonishingly violent book to help “manage their fears and anxieties” should have been balanced by more and better analysis of the book’s political content.

But at her best Smith combines critical and reader-sensitive reading to great effect. Her discussion of Harold Bell Wright’s early twentieth-century novels (*Shepherd of the Hills*, *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, et al.) is brilliant: Smith points out that he intentionally “was not writing literature” but instead was “sermonizing to the rural and

poorly educated” (63), but in the process of investing their lives “with millennial importance” and “superior moral authority” he also promoted “disturbing gender and race politics” (71-72). Her examination of the 1950s self-help books by Norman Vincent Peale, Fulton Sheen, Billy Graham, et al. nicely highlight the ways in which “these books were not just tracts promising happiness to anxious Americans,” but “they were also propaganda for ‘the American way,’ both inside and outside the country” (191). But the most fascinating chapter of *What Would Jesus Read?* is “The New Gnosticism,” in which Smith reports on her findings as a participant-observer in a Unitarian Universalist (UU) reading group, focusing on their discussion of Elaine Pagels’ *Beyond Belief* and Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. Simultaneously sympathetic (*What Would Jesus Read?* is dedicated to the UUs) and critical (she candidly observes that she was made uncomfortable by the proclivity of UUs to see themselves “as the chosen few”), Smith reports that discussion of these books related to “the new Gnosticism” allowed the UUs “to create religious identity narratives” in which they are “an embattled intellectual aristocracy in an evangelical wasteland” (297).

In this illuminating final section of *What Would Jesus Read?* Erin Smith brings Matthew Hedstrom’s masterful *The Rise of Liberal Religion* forward to the present. If it is indeed the case that Gnosticism has simply become mainstream in liberal Protestantism, Hal Lindsay would not be surprised.

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