the secular city revisited

harvey cox

and the religious moment

in american culture

RELIGION IN THE SECULAR CITY: Toward a Postmodern Theology. By Harvey Cox. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1984. $16.95 cloth, $7.95 paper. RELIGION AND AMERICA: Spirituality in a Secular Age. Edited by Mary Douglas and Steven M. Tipton. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983. $17.95 cloth, $10.53 paper.

Religion and America surveys the "religious moment" in contemporary American culture in order to evaluate the health of spiritual life in a predominantly secular era. Several writers address the failure of academics and critics to anticipate fundamental changes in the shape of American religion in the past two decades. Scholars in the 1950s expected both the emergence of "secular religion" and the waning influence of religious commitment in American society. "Instead, surveying conditions today," noted Stephen Graubard, in the preface to the issue of *Daedalus* in which many of the articles originally appeared, "they find the 'secular' paradigm denied, religion increasingly suffused throughout the culture, and many of the most traditional beliefs enjoying new importance in large subcultures of the country."[1] While fundamentalist churches have grown in numbers and visibility, moreover, the liberal mainline churches have experienced a decline. Although the authors disagree about the potential revitalization of theology in public discourse, most agree that "religion continues to speak to the central issues of political order, however far privatization, secularization, and nostalgia have progressed." This useful book defines the parameters of an ongoing debate about the nature of religious belief in modern society, but it offers few solutions. It is therefore nicely complemented by Harvey Cox's *Religion in the Secular City,* a bold and thoughtful answer to the dilemmas faced by believers in late twentieth century America.

To focus on the "religious moment," one must have an understanding of how modernity came into being, and on this issue, anthropologist Mary Douglas offers some insightful and highly critical remarks. An almost romantic view of premodernity, an assumption that premoderns could believe because science had not yet removed mystery and wonder from their cosmology, Douglas argues, has prevented academics from accurately understanding the transition to twentieth century religious sensibilities. Thus cultural bias has imposed the model of secularization on this process, and it does not adequately explain historical transformation in all times and places. "Some premoderns," she writes, "are indeed organized according to the stereotype, in highly ascriptive social institutions. But some of them are as mobile, footloose, and uncommitted as any modern academic. Some have been gripped in the throngs of bureaucracy; some have been ruthlessly competitive individualists."[2] Although Douglas does not advance an alternative mode of analyzing the transmission of religious culture through time and space, she does raise serious methodological questions about how students of religion have differentiated premodern from contemporary society. In addition, she points to the need for both a broader comparative framework and a deeper historical perspective in the field of religious studies.

Several of the articles in *Religion and America* attempt to provide a historical context for the study of modern religious movements. Frank Manuel places the current politicization of Judaism in perspective by examining the Enlightenment thinkers' reassessment of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. George Marsden analyzes the historical development of fundamentalism in the twentieth century and finds in its theology elements of both modernism and antimodernism. Edwin S. Gaustad traces the conflict between fundamentalists and liberals and concludes that while liberal sensibilities may be in eclipse, they have not been discredited. And in a compelling examination of the social functions of Christian thought since the eighteenth century, Wolfgang Schluchter suggests that two dominant themes—privatization and depoliticization—may yet be successfully challenged by the resurgence of a messianic vision. Each of these articles focuses on the relationship between past religious movements and contemporary concerns.[3]

Religion and America effectively surveys the best of current scholarship on the significance of religion in modern American culture, and it offers readers a useful cross-section of work in the field. Ironically, however, the academic focus reflects a notable silence on the very forces which are transforming the religious scene in the United States. The categories of analysis—Protestant, Catholic, Jew, liberal, fundamentalist—are for the most part quite traditional. Conspicuously absent is any discussion of recent developments in feminist theology, the church-based peace and sanctuary movements, the contribution of black institutions to American religious life or the history of unbelief. Academic concerns focus on categories of belief and the waning power of the theological voice in public discourse. The essays in this volume constitute a view of the religious moment from the academic establishment in America, and the authors do not convey any sense that the fundamental changes which scholars failed to predict for the 1980s actually signify that new ways of understanding the relationship of religious experience to everyday life are in the offing.

Harvey Cox carries this discussion onto new terrain, however, by suggesting that the modern or liberal religious synthesis is irrelevant and that a postmodern theology is in the making.[4] No one could be more surprised than Cox about the renewal of religious commitment in contemporary society. In his 1965 book *The*

Secular City, Cox tried to come to terms with two overarching themes of modern social history: urbanization and secularization. Accepting both the demise of traditional Christian institutions, symbols and rituals, and urbanization as a fundamental reorientation in the way men and women live together, Cox tried to answer German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer's questions: "How do we speak of God without religion? How do we speak in a secular fashion of God?" He suggested that the "church has the responsibility to be the servant and healer of the city."[5] Because he wrote in the mid-1960s, Cox's social context was an urban environment fraught with racial and ethnic tension, inequality and poverty. To speak of God without religion, he contended, the church must subordinate its concerns with institutions, symbols and rituals and immerse itself in the social problems of the secular city's inhabitants. In 1965 Cox understood the urban environment as a given, and he assigned believers a role as healers, not creators of the social order.

Religion in the Secular City is a very different book. The liberal tradition with its insistence on the separation of religion and politics and of church and state, its celebration of individualism and its administrative structures—the theological foundation of the secular city as Cox conceived it—no longer satisfies the postmodern world. "The failure of modern theology," Cox declares, "is that it continues to supply plausible answers to questions that fewer and fewer people are asking, and inadvertently perpetuates the social bases of oppression."[6] Cox has not articulated an alternative, but he has written a convincing obituary for the theological consensus that has dominated Western culture since the mid-nineteenth century.

Modernist theologians from Friedrich Schleiermacher to Karl Barth shared the common goal of attempting to make the "Christian message credible to what they understood as the modern mind." Their target was the troubled thinker, the skeptic, the deist and the atheist, people who had declared themselves intellectually unable to believe. In the hands of the modernists for example, the harsh predestination theology of the Calvinists was rendered palatable, for they defined God as "universal, equally approachable by all and available to all. There was little room in modern theology either for a partisan God who takes sides in historical struggles, or for a God who has to be sought in radically dissimilar ways by different peoples" (Cox, 176, 178). Although the God of the modernists presided beneficently over this world, he did not engage actively on the side of people struggling to create new social political forms. Consequently modern theology became increasingly concerned with the life of the inner spirit, with individual relationships between believers and their God, and its theologians did not try to relate their ideas to the great social and economic transformations of the nineteenth century which ushered in industrial capitalism and its attendant bourgeois ideology.

From the fringes of the modern world, however, the disinherited of American society and the peasant communities of Latin America, a new constituency now challenges the modernist perspective. In the base communities of Latin America, peasants and priests are using their religious traditions as a means of understanding the origins of inequality and oppression. The result of this reunification of religion and politics, it seems, is a powerful critique of the capitalist and imperialist structures which have made their world what it is. In the United States two constituencies are questioning the modernist synthesis. Mainline churches are active in the peace and anti-nuclear movements. Cox provides a telling example in the Roman Catholic parish of St. Francis Xavier, Hyannis, Massachusetts, which

once was a house of worship for the Kennedy family, and is now involved in the resistence to the American presence in El Salvador. More significant for Cox's point of view, however, is the resurgence of the fundamentalist movement in America, a development which he insists has essentially altered the religious landscape in this country.

Although radicals and American fundamentalists differ in goals and strategies, both reject the separation of religion and politics inherent in modernist thought. Politics, moreover, occupies a greatly enlarged realm, for both groups have become sensitive to what might be called the political dimension of everyday life. Like feminists who discovered that patriarchal relationships determined a wide range of daily experience in both personal and public life, both fundamentalists and liberationists are critical of power relationships which inhibit the acceptance of their religious values as enforceable guidelines for everyday behavior. Fundamentalists yearn for a political order in which the state legislates their views on divorce, abortion and school prayer. Liberation theology addresses such issues as the distribution of wealth and political power, the delivery of health and educational services and the status of women. In this context, the church which once made its exit from the political realm must now find its way back if it is to have any relevance in the postmodern era.

Unlike most academic commentators, Cox eschews a condescending treatment of fundamentalism and tries to understand it as a subculture with its own ideology. A series of pamphlets published between 1910 and 1915 designated fundamentals of the Christian faith as "belief in the deity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, the bodily Resurrection of Christ, the imminent Second Coming, the substitutionary atonement, and—very emphatically—the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the whole Bible" (44).[7] Fundamentalists dedicated themselves to the restoration of a faith undefiled by modern refinements and innovations, and they saw the past as a golden age of belief to be replicated in the present. Similarly, in political matters today they tend to ally with conservative causes. Followers of Moral Majority's Jerry Falwell, for example, seek a return to the traditional patriarchal family, support a strong national defense and are pro-life and pro-Israel. They press for the equality of creationist and scientific accounts of the origins of the earth because they believe that the Biblical account can be supported scientifically. Fundamentalists are critical of the authority of modern science not because they reject scientific explanation, but because they resent the elevation of technical expertise at the expense of divine revelation. In addition, they are suspicious of sprawling, modern urban environments which they claim alienate men and women not only from their spiritual natures, but also from the bonds of Christian community. This latter observation leads Cox to assume erroneously that the swelling ranks of the movement come from the rural poor.

For all of his sympathy and perceptiveness, however, Cox offers a curious criticism of fundamentalism. Its fatal flaw is its inability to deal with religious pluralism, "its insistence that it is not 'sacred Scriptures' but one particular Scripture, not religious traditions but one tradition alone, that merits fidelity" (59). Ironically, Cox criticizes the fundamentalists' failure to accept pluralism, a concept which may be the modernists' most enduring contribution to Western culture. This assessment may be a measure of Cox's own ambivalent commitment to the liberal tradition, for he seems unable to imagine a society in which sectarian views can flourish with integrity.[8]

The fundamentalist movement represents a widespread and popular dissatisfaction with modernist ideas and therefore raises questions which the creators of a

postmodern faith will have to answer. Fundamentalist theologians have succeeded in placing back on the agenda problems which modernists thought they had resolved. Academic disdain for fundamentalism, Cox claims, has prevented scholars from discerning the immense respect of the movement's leaders and teachers for science and reason. While liberals argue that science and religion deal with mutually exclusive realms of knowledge, fundamentalists insist that "they can complement each other as ways of knowing a single order of reality." A postmodern faith, Cox writes, "will agree with the fundamentalists that ultimately people will not be satisfied with the separation of will and intellect, thought and feeling, affect and cognition which has informed the modern liberal understanding." Much of Cox's commentary on the movement makes it seem like the vanguard of theological transformation (54, 58).

Cox's respectful and intelligent treatment of the fundamentalists enables him to appreciate both their history and achievements, but ultimately he argues that their contribution to the making of a postmodern theology will be insignificant. Because they have not formulated a critical perspective on the managers of corporate capitalism, the leaders of the movement are out of touch with the interests of rural poor workers who are attracted to the movement. Second, the emphasis on the imminent Second Coming of Christ discourages organizing to change the world of the here and now. Third, the romance with the electronic media is a self-defeating strategy, devoid of the face-to-face contact which antimodernists admire about the presecular, preurban world. Ultimately, it seems, the fundamentalists will be the architects of their own irrelevance.

By the end of the first section of the book, readers may suspect that Cox has set the fundamentalists up as a foil for the heroes of his story, the members of base communities in Latin America. While the fundamentalists defend capitalism as the "American way of life," radicals draw upon the same Christian tradition to fight economic exploitation and political repression. If Falwell is the archtypical fundamentalist, Ernesto Cardenal, Nicaragua's Minister of Cultural Affairs, is his radical counterpart. Cardenal studied under Thomas Merton at Columbia University (1947-49) but returned to his native Nicaragua to join the opposition to Samoza. A mystic and a poet, Cardenal founded a monastery which served as a center for prayer, study and work in the local community. Throughout the 1970s Cardenal urged Nicaraguans toward a non-violent revolution, but sustained attacks on his community convinced him of the need to join the Sandinistas. He is now a central actor in the reconstruction of Nicaraguan society and politics.

For leftist critics, the most significant failing of modern theology is the "consignment of God and religion to the inner subjective world of the individual" (128). Using Cardenal's community as a model, Cox suggests that the postmodern synthesis will bring about the reunification of mysticism and politics, art and political criticism and piety and power. Postmodern faithful will gather neither in the coercive religious structures of the past nor in churches run by clerics, but in democratically organized Christian communities dedicated to social justice and equality. Lay leadership and folk piety will be at the heart of the new movement.

Religion in the Secular City is an odd statement for a liberal, mainstream American academic; critical evaluations of capitalist social relations are not characteristic of the American religious establishment. Cox follows a quasi-Marxist trajectory, for he suggests that bourgeois religious hegemony will wither away, and a new theology which articulates the needs of the wretched of the earth will emerge to take its place. In contrast, commentators have customarily argued that the faithful of the United States share a commitment to a common heritage of

peculiarly American religious values which transcends differences of class, race, ethnicity and gender. In addition, Cox's observation that modern theology tends to isolate religious experience within the personal and subjective realm is a compelling judgment on the alienating power of individualism in American culture. For these reasons alone the book deserves a wide audience.

From a historian's point of view, however, the books suffers from two shortcomings. First, Cox is not sufficiently appreciative of the complexity of American religious history. While religious values have provided a rationale for relations between labor and capital in the modern era, the same tradition has also been a source of resistence to them. Andrew Carnegie may have drawn upon Protestant theology to inculcate habits of temperance, thrift, industry and punctuality—the hallmarks of a disciplined workforce—but labor activists have also marshalled the same traditions to support collective resistance to employers. Both slaves and slaveholders made use of Biblical history to assist them in the tasks of survival and domination, respectively. Biblical images of women have supported both traditional female roles and radical departures from them. Religious argument has functioned not only as an inhibitor of the political consciousness of Americans in the past, but also as a catalyst, yet Cox tells the story as if the forces of secular modernity triumphed unopposed by people steeped in religious traditions.[9]

To be sure, the failing is not Cox's alone; it is endemic to the field of American religious history. Scholars have been so enamoured of the emergence of religious pluralism and the separation of church and state that a refined version of the progress model of historical transformation still exists in their field. Given their reluctance to see the religious arena as a context in which fundamental questions of social and political order are contested, it is not surprising that Cox sees only the hegemonic function of religion in past time.[10]

This point raises a second criticism. For Cox the real center of hope for the development of a postmodern theology is in Latin America, and he does not identify a similar movement in the United States. Curiously, he ignores one of the most visibly political folk movements of the past three decades in America—the black civil rights movement. Based in the folk traditions of Southern evangelical religious culture, the civil rights movement joined religious belief and political action into a powerful indictment of race and class relations in America. Black theology and religious institutions provided a base for resistance to racial domination, and the movement's success casts doubt on the passive acceptance of modernist ideas among groups who have long inhabited the fringes of power in American society. Cox's insensitivity to radical religious traditions in the American past, it seems, has inhibited his appreciation of their present significance.

The importance of Cox's insights go beyond theology to the nature of American democratic thought itself. In 1955 Louis Hartz argued that because Americans had never had to contest a feudal regime they were incapable of understanding or sympathizing with Marxist ideological perspectives. American culture depoliticized ideological debate and coopted fundamentally conflicting positions into Lockean liberal configurations. Consequently Americans could debate only means, never ends. Hartz's analysis has been mistakenly identified with the interpretive framework of the consensus historians, but in reality he held a tragic view of historical process. The liberal tradition dominated American social thought so completely, he argued, that Americans had been rendered incapable of recognizing it as an ideology.[11] In his analysis of liberation theology, Cox strains against the liberal tradition, but in his commentary on fundamentalism he reveals

that, try as he might, he cannot ultimately transcend the limitations of the modernist perspective.

To return to the questions raised in *Religion and America*, scholars in the 1950s may have failed to predict the current popularity of traditional religious institutions and beliefs as well as radical movements because they did not foresee the increasing significance of race, class, gender and ethnicity in the shaping of religious experience. Nor did they understand the roots from which these movements sprang. Largely influenced by Durkheim, they defined religion in integrative terms; that is, they assumed that religious belief functioned to internalize the authority of any particular society in the believer.[12] Cox suggests that religious commitment for both fundamentalists and liberationists serves the opposite purpose, for it empowers them to resist structures of authority in their respective political and personal environments. This single observation is the most compelling to date by any American theologian about the making of a postmodern religious sensibility. Cox's inability to move definitively out of the camp of liberal academic commentators, however, may leave readers wondering if Hartz wasn't right after all.

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notes

The reviewer would like to thank Christina Simmons and the members of Zane Miller's Frontiers of Urban Research Seminar, Department of History, University of Cincinnati, for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

1. *Daedalus* (Winter, 1982), viii-ix.
2. Mary Douglas, "The Effects of Modernization on Religious Change," *Religion and America,* 42.
3. Frank E. Manuel, "Israel and the Enlightenment," 44-63; George Marsden, "Preachers of Paradox: The Religious New Right in Historical Perspective," 150-68; Edwin Scott Gaustad, "Did the Fundamentalists Win?," 169-78; Wolfgang Schluchter, "The Future of Religion," 64-78.
4. On the emergence of the liberal synthesis in America, see William R. Hutchinson, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1976). Two useful historical accounts of fundamentalism are Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Chicago, 1970), and George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York, 1980).
5. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (Rev. ed. New York, 1966 [Orig. pub. 1965]), 115.
6. Cox, *Religion in the Secular City,* 159. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.
7. Cox underestimates the diversity of positions within the fundamentalist movement and tends to treat it as a monolithic entity. See Marsden, "Preachers of Paradox," 163-5.
8. On modern sectarian movements, see Steven M. Tipton, "The Moral Logic of Alternative Religions," *Religion and America,* 79-107.
9. See Herbert G. Gutman, "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age," in Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1976), 79-117. On slavery, see Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York, 1977), and Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974). On women, see Katherine Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in Domesticity* (New York, 1973), and Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Connecticut, 1981).
10. For a recent example of the depiction of religious pluralism as an achievement rather than an ideological construct, see Edwin S. Gaustad, *A Documentary History of Religion in America to the Civil War* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982), xv. Two promising examples of historical scholarship which focus perceptively on ethnicity and class, respectively, are William G. McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789-1839* (New Haven, 1984) and Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York, 1984), ch. 2 and 3.
11. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York, 1955). For some brief but insightful remarks on Hartz, see John M. Murrin, "Political Development," Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole, eds., *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore, 1984), 412-13.
12. On this point, see Douglas, 30-2.