
Scholars and students of religion alike will benefit tremendously from consulting the vast range of scholarly perspectives presented in this compendium on religion in the United States. In addition to a comprehensive treatment of American religious traditions and movements, Philip Goff also has taken care to include chapters on the interface between religion and various other cultural manifestations. The distinguished contributors to this volume include established scholars and (even more) newer voices in the study of American religion. The premise unifying the entries is that the *study of* religion in the United States has been transformed over time even more dramatically than has American religion itself. As such, Goff is careful to include many new perspectives on American religious history, which has resulted in a volume with a fresh historiographical take on many of the subjects it covers.

Goff’s introductory chapter introduces the reader to the first historians of American religion. He emphasizes the role of theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, who stood at the vanguard of the professionalization of the study of religion that led to its eventual acceptance as a respected subfield of history. From the narrowness of “church history” (meaning sectarian efforts to preserve written narratives of their beliefs, activities, memberships, and practices) eventually grew “American religious history,” a much more inclusive, comprehensive, and comparative effort to understand the variety of faith traditions in the United States. This brief overview should shed valuable light on the development of religious history as an academic subfield in the American context. Space does not allow me to treat each of the chapters included in this volume separately, so I shall highlight just a few that struck me as especially insightful.

The section on “Religion in American Society and Culture” is comprised of 24 treatments of religion’s relationship with various social and cultural institutions, such as class and labor, family, media, and science. Kristy Nabhan-Warren’s piece titled “Borderlands” is a lovely historiography elucidating scholarly approaches to the study of religion and “spaces where dynamic identities are crafted as a result of the lived realities of colonized and colonizing peoples” (p. 29). Nabhan-Warren persuasively insists that the common American experience of being a borderlander must be understood as transcending the cultural significance of physical borders or ethnic categorizations; scholars of religion would seem to be well situated to contribute to such an effort. Ira Chernus’s contribution on “Civil Religion” is a cogent account of a concept that frequently is misunderstood and misrepresented. Reflecting Goff’s emphasis on the origins and development of the field of American religious history, Chernus notes the paradoxical influences
of Durkheim and Niebuhr in Robert Bellah’s pioneering work on American civil religion. He laments “a mistaken assumption: that studying [American civil religion] materials necessarily means … implicitly endorsing … [civil religion] and all the intellectual baggage it carries” (p. 68) and calls for renewed empirical attention to the concept. Kathryn Lofton’s piece on “Piety, Practice, and Ritual” is noteworthy for its depth and its accessibility (both hallmarks of Lofton’s work). She examines the recent turn in scholarship that has “press[ed] eyes away from rabbis and priests, canons and sermonic kingpins to stare instead at the pews, the outlier parishes, and the domestic domains that … emphasize the material and embodied parts of religious experience” (p. 242). How do ordinary Americans experience religion? How do they shape and remake religious practices over generations? Historians of American religion seem now to care deeply about questions such as these, as exemplified by the rapid growth of the “lived religion” perspective led by scholars such as Robert Orsi. Lofton notes that categories of religious practice are now “disputed and evolving, personal and socially constructed” (p. 251), which makes the study of religion itself ever richer and more challenging.

The section on “Traditions and Movements” includes nineteen chapters dealing with different religious groups ranging from prominent traditions such as the Baptist and Catholic faiths to emerging religious minority groups such as Buddhists, Mormons, and Muslims. Clearly it was not possible for Goff to include every possible American religious group in this handbook. Most major traditions are included, and Catholics are treated in two separate chapters (one up through 1945 and the other after that year). I found the chapters on less well-understood traditions especially meritorious. Tracy Neal Leavelle’s chapter, “American Indians,” provides a brief overview of the encounter between traditional Native American religion and European influences. Black Elk, who in his lifetime was both a Lakota holy man and a devout Catholic, exemplifies this cultural collision. Black Elk was “the keeper of a sacred pipe … who carried a rosary in his hands” (p. 398). Meanwhile, David Weaver-Zercher offers the reader a handy synopsis of Anabaptists from their European beginnings to present-day Amish and Mennonites, while Charles Prebish deftly shows how much American scholars—and Americans in general—have learned about Buddhism in a short time, but also how much they have yet to learn. In his chapter about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, David Whittaker resists any temptation to rehearse relatively well-known LDS history, focusing instead on recent work in the area of Mormon studies. And the irresistibly titled chapter on “New and Homegrown Religions” by Sean McCloud sheds light on how scholars’ approaches to emergent faith traditions have evolved over the last century. McCloud emphasizes that scholars today are less likely to posit deprivation or deviance theories as reasons why people choose to practice new or homegrown religions. Instead,