
Reviewed by Michael T. Girolimon

All denominational histories, regardless of their specific emphasis (social-cultural, intellectual-theological, institutional, etc.), are especially controversial because not everyone will be pleased with the author’s selection of historical data (“facts”) nor will agree with his or her methodological explanations (“interpretations”). Mickey Crews’s *The Church of God: A Social History* is clearly no exception. Crews has chosen many unflattering facts from the Church of God’s past (e.g., snake handling and organizational separation of its black members) and has emphasized the ways in which American culture (e.g., economics, and political thought) helped to shape the denomination’s beliefs and practices.

Crews, a professor of history and chairman of the Department of History and Social Science at Troy State University in Georgia, has written a concise and convincing account concerning the origins and development of the Church of God from an obscure, small Holiness sect in southern Appalachia in 1886 to a prominent, international Pentecostal denomination in the latter part of the twentieth century using a blend of historical and sociological analysis. As a complement and, in places, a revision of Charles W. Conn’s institutional history, *Like a Mighty Army* (1955, rev. ed. 1977), Crews’s work attempts to explain how the Church of God has continued to move steadily from an originally staunch position of religious and cultural separatism ever closer toward the mainstream of conservative Protestant evangelicalism and middle-class American society. While giving some attention to the internal religious motivations within the Church of God, the author shows that this progression has been strongly influenced by the group’s cultural environment, as often a reflection of society’s values and mores as it was a rejection of them. As Crews summarizes the issue: “Despite its various countercultural patterns ... the Church of God was a product of its times” (p. 18).

The book’s seven chapters follow a thematic approach, focusing respectively upon the group’s ideological origins in the late nineteenth-century South, its institutional bureaucratization, prevalent social and political taboos for its members, the two socially-controversial practices of prayer for healing and snake handling, the place and status of women in its ranks, its official positions on militarism, and a sampling of the myriad of changes which took place after 1940. But Crews basically schematizes two “chronological” portraits of one denomination, roughly separated by the Second World War. These two portraits illustrate both the changes and continuities in the Church of God which Crews argues
were the result, in part, of embracing, rejecting, and/or modifying the dominant cultural ethos.

In the first picture, Crews characterizes the pre-World War II Church of God as intellectually confined, highly regionalized, tightly controlled, and culturally isolated. Ideologically, the early Church of God was not only a product of its religious environs (mainly the Holiness movement), but also its political milieu, specifically Populism, which appealed to the identical socioeconomic groups as the nascent denomination. The two shared the concerns of social isolation and insecurity, the sense of cultural crisis, and a dismay at the effects of rapid industrialization. The organization also slowly added administrative agencies and procedures in response to internal crises and geographic expansion. Members submitted to an encyclopedia of social and political taboos; economic and societal pressures forced the softening of proscriptions against trade in tobacco and “worldly” personal habits, but prohibitions against such matters as alcohol, political parties, and labor unions persisted. Medical treatment was often spurned in favor of prayer for God’s healing, and snake handling, officially repudiated in 1928, continued well into the 1930s throughout the movement, despite legal restraints in many southern states. Unlike many Protestant denominations at the time, the Church of God gave select opportunities to women in ministry, including preaching, but denied them ordination after 1909. And throughout both World Wars, the group advocated strict pacifism—despite the antagonisms by the government—but permitted non-combat service for its members in World War II.

Crews’s second depiction of the Church of God after the War evinces great changes and only some (albeit significant) continuities with the previous picture. As a result of the general economic boom of the 1950s, many members ascended into the middle class, adopting its values and mores. Membership likewise grew steadily, continuing the growth of bureaucracy. The “puritanical code of morality” began to erode quickly in the face of societal pressures of the 1960s and 70s (p. 38). Political involvement was officially encouraged in light of impending cultural evils (e.g., a Roman Catholic president). Snake handling had long since disappeared as well as the denigration of medicine. The day after the end of World War II, the denomination officially lifted its ban against combat service for its members, allowing for personal conscience. One glaring continuity with the past was the denomination’s adamant refusal to ordain women. In addition, Crews notes other changes. Blacks, separated organizationally from whites within the denomination since 1912 and often placed under all white male supervision, were integrated fully by 1966, the result of progressives within and the Civil Rights movement without. Education became a greater priority and members began earning advanced degrees. The Church of God dramatically furthered its evolution into the conservative Protestant mainstream as its “sectarianism mellowed” (p. 138) in the postwar