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Religion and American Cultures: Tradition, Diversity, and Popular Expression, 2nd Edition (Book Review)

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Religion and American Cultures: Tradition, Diversity, and Popular Expression, 2nd Edition

Gary Laderman and Luis D. León, eds. *Religion and American Cultures: Tradition, Diversity, and Popular Expression*. Second Edition. Santa Barbara, CA.: ABC-CLIO, 2015. 4 vols: 1766 pp. \$399.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 1610691091 (set).

Religion and American Cultures: Tradition, Diversity, and Popular Expression (RAC) is an ambitious, four-volume set seeking to provide something between a snapshot and a detailed exposition of the intersection of religion and culture in North America. Consisting of three volumes of essays, written at a high school reading level, and one volume of primary documents, this collection provides both a bird's eye view and a more detailed boots-on-the-ground perspective.

The editors appear well qualified for their work. Dr. Gary Laderman, chair of the Department of Religion at Emory University, is the author of many books addressing the intersection of religion and culture. Dr. Luis León is associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Denver and the author of several books. His area of expertise includes religions in America. The advisory board for RAC is also top-notch. When you have three winners of the Guggenheim Fellowship for Humanities, all of who are voluminously published and well known, and another well-regarded professor of religion on your advisory board, you're likely to be well advised. The members of the board are Diana Eck of Harvard, Colleen McDannell of the University of Utah, Robert Orsi of Northwestern University, and Anthony B. Pinn of Rice University.

Essays in volume 1 cover large areas encompassing "ethnicity, institutions and other forms of communities" (xxiii). Included in this broad sweep are the African American, Asian, and Latin communities. Tucked away within these broad topics are essays focusing more minutely on related traditions. For example, the section offering an overview of Buddhism continues with essays more closely examining Buddhist churches, Mahayana religious communities, Soka Gakkai International — USA, Theravada religious communities, Tibetan Buddhism, and Zen.

Expanding on volume 1, volume 2 looks at religious cultures, a term specifically used to ensure inclusion of "groups, identities, and other formations constituted by religion but perhaps not explicitly declared as such" (xxiv). Constructed in much the same way as volume 1, volume 2 includes a large section dealing with popular culture and more succinct essays dealing with advertising, cultural saints, faith, film, and religion in the news. The second volume looks at the broad topics of volume 1 and seeks to answer such questions as how these religious and ethical beliefs, and spiritual rituals are formed in America.

Volume 3 in the first edition of this set was a collection of primary documents. In this second edition, volume 3 is a collection of lengthy essays categorized by the three broad headings listed in the set's subtitle: tradition, diversity, and popular expression. This is the most eclectic volume in the set, addressing issues ranging from religion in prison and the New Atheism to paranormal America and American heathenry. The nineteen essays contained in this volume are all new, so this is a significant addition to the second edition.

Volume 4 is a primary source repository. The editors felt that American religions have "been shaped strongly by historical contexts" (xxv) and assembled a collection of documents that would reflect that context most broadly. Unlike the other volumes, this one has no useful category headings to guide the reader. The documents are ordered by date, and there is an introductory synopsis at the beginning of each document. The diversity of this collection is evident, reflecting many different spiritual and secular links to faith. With over eighty-one entries it is not surprising that several documents seem to have a somewhat tenuous link to the subject at hand, the interaction of faith and culture. Two that present themselves immediately are the short excerpt from Spaulding Gray's *Sex and Death at the Age of Fourteen* and the perplexing choice of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1961 speech on the military-industrial complex.

The very detailed index for the set, found at the end of volume 4, is extremely useful in a work that scatters its topics among volumes and subgroupings. Especially helpful is the selected bibliography of almost 1,300 items, most culled from the last two and a half decades. This bibliography is in addition to the extra readings that are suggested at the end of each essay. A scan of those articles shows that currency in research was a priority for this work, and the editors were scrupulously fair in carving out almost identical page counts for each topic. While some might wish for a greater emphasis on one topic or the other, this consistent page count serves to level the playing field in a set that could have expanded far beyond four volumes.

The editors admit that not everything will be covered in a set such as this. They write that their work is an attempt to “mark a moment” (xxi) in American history and challenge our settled understanding of that moment’s meaning. In fact, while they do not always agree with the essay writers’ approaches to their topics, they do praise their commitment to “disturbing [the] reader’s easy familiarity with religion” (xxi). While this is fine for any academic work, it calls into question the editors’ own description of this set as a reference work. That word is freighted with a specific meaning, most often implying a settled understanding of a subject at that particular moment. But perhaps that is an overly modern understanding of those words in a postmodern world. For undergraduates — the audience this set is probably aimed at — the layout, and even its reference look, with several volumes and scholarly topic headings, may keep them from understanding that they are being challenged rather than informed.

Although the editors state that some essays do not reflect their positions, a reading of some hot button issues revealed, by and large, writing that presented opposing positions fairly. The primary essays for science (James Gilbert), the New Atheism (Gregory Allen Robbins), and the subcategory of abortion (Louis A. Ruprecht Jr.) are as balanced as could be hoped. The subcategory of the Bible and Sodom in America (Daniel Boyarin) presents just one position with no apologies. A scan of many other major topics and subcategories seems to indicate that the 75 percent mark is an honest one. The editors have done their job in presenting as many voices as possible. An anomaly within this pattern, however, appears in the preface to the set. The editors define Islamophobia as a “brand of ignorance and hatred” (xxii) and then apply that label without nuance to the efforts of all those wishing to keep a mosque and an Islamic cultural center from being constructed three blocks from the Twin Towers site. Certainly such an observation in a work hoping to include all aspects of cultural and religious interaction could have been more circumspect and thoughtful.

When considering purchase of this set, thought must be given to what other sets might also fill the same niche. While aspects of this set can be found in other encyclopedias and monographs, and the primary documents may be found almost anywhere on the Internet, there is really no one set that coalesces all the elements present here. That makes this set a unique addition to any library. However, better resources, even if they need to be purchased individually, should be pursued for the seminary level. The relatively brief nature of most articles does not provide the depth needed at a graduate level. While this set would fit comfortably in a high school library, and adequately in an undergraduate library, it would be an ill fit for a seminary library.

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