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Mark Hulsether, **Religion, Culture and Politics in the Twentieth-Century United States**, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007, 256 pp., $80.00 (hardcover), $26.83 (paperback).

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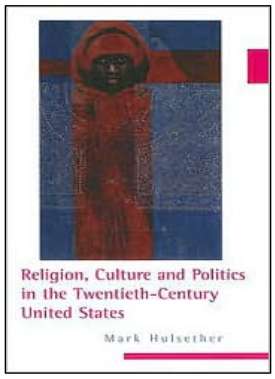

Mark Hulsether's book could not have been published at a better time. From debates about gay marriage to the teaching of intelligent design, religion in contemporary America has assumed a prominent place in the national dialogue. Although one might be tempted to believe that religion is more influential today than ever before, history shows that religion has always affected American society. To fully understand America, one must first understand the role that religion plays in American culture.

In *Religion, Culture and Politics in the Twentieth-Century United States*, Hulsether outlines this history. Instead of explaining the doctrines of specific religions—like what Mormons believe about the afterlife, or what Methodists believe about original sin—Hulsether examines the broad roles that religions play in American culture. For Hulsether, religion is not just a body of doctrine. It is a lens through which one can examine the history of a country.

Hulsether seeks to write an "uncluttered introduction," pruned of superfluous detail (p. 1). He argues that religions generally are not "monolithic blocks of tradition," but instead, that they are living beings full of "complexity and fluidity" (p. 3). To give a sense of this fluidity, Hulsether examines several religious groups, paying particular attention "to many levels of experience inside each group, interactions with outsiders, and changes over time" (ibid.).

An important element of Hulsether's analysis is the notion that religions do not have clear boundaries. However, there could be boundaries according to basic beliefs, feelings about secular society, or the media (p. 4). Hulsether considers two Baptist churches that disagree about a matter of doctrine, and "condemn each other to hell" (p. 5). Should one consider the two churches members of different religions? The answer is not obvious.

Hulsether examines not only religion brought over by European colonists, but also Native American religions. In their faiths, indigenous peoples did not clearly distinguish between the sacred and secular realms. Instead, the two worlds lay on a "continuum." Additionally, Native American religions did not have holy books at their foundations. As a result, they possessed strong "oral tradition[s]" (p. 22). Furthermore, Native American religions generally had more space for women. In contrast with the European immigrants, Native American societies were "more balanced and less hierarchical," and often included "matrifocal families" and "female ritual leaders" (p. 23). But while indigenous religion may seem utopian, Native Americans, like Europeans, often had an adversarial relationship with nature.

Hulsether shines when he describes how religion in America intersected with contemporary cultural issues. For example, in chapter 2, Hulsether catalogues American religion in the early 20th century. He describes the various faiths and their permutations, as well as how they were influenced by their cultural environments. How did Reform Judaism begin? It was a "movement somewhat analogous to Deism and Unitarianism in its stress on reason, ethics, and using Enlightenment criteria to evaluate which traditions to retain and which to leave behind" (p. 52). How did early Catholic immigrants fare, especially since much of America considered the country to be Protestant? Despite anti-Catholic prejudice, by 1850, Catholics had more members than any other religion in the United States (p. 58). What about the spectrum of Protestant faiths? Did they all get along? During the early years of the 20th century, a movement to unite all of Protestantism—"ecumenism" (p. 62)—developed. By 1908, Protestants formed the Federal Council of Churches; by 1950, this organization grew to become the National Council of Churches. Finally, a World Council of Churches emerged, which Hulsether likens to a "Protestant version of the United Nations" (ibid.).

This cataloguing demonstrates a thorough knowledge of differences among American religion. The author notes the places where Lutherans settled, the ways in which Episcopalians differed from Congregationalists, and the Scriptural basis for the Pentecostal tradition of speaking in tongues, showing a command of detail that fills in conceptual blanks. Who exactly are the Russian Orthodox? How did Mormon polygamy conflict with U.S. law? The answers become clear.

In chapter 3, Hulsether explains how religion intertwined with early 20th-century historical events, especially the industrial boom. At the time, religion mixed with two different levels of society: labor unions and vastly wealthy individuals. Andrew Carnegie believed that, by donating some of his wealth to local communities—for example, funding libraries, schools, and hospitals—he could "create Christian harmony" (p. 82). Clergy across the country proclaimed a "gospel of wealth" that encouraged people to become rich. In contrast, Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist seminary professor, believed that "economic oppression" was a sin (p. 83).

Chapter 4 examines the Hollywood Code. In the 1930s, film attendance was high: "The weekly attendance at films was 90 million out of a population of 120 million" (p. 122). Hollywood studios had enormous cultural power, and when they began to produce films with controversial themes, like gangsters and sex, "a group of Catholic reformers [pressed] for tougher censorship" (p. 124). Soon, the censorship movement led to the creation of the Legion of Decency, which "operated under the umbrella of the National Catholic Welfare Conference" (ibid.).

Hulsether also succeeds when he zooms in on minute details of religious culture. When, in chapter 7, he discusses the intelligent design movement, he claims that, although proponents of ID posit an anonymous "intelligent designer," they would "be outraged if their children were taught Raelian theories of creation by extra-terrestrials or NOI theories of an evil scientist breeding a race of white devils" (p. 206). Here, Hulsether points out a subtle weakness in intelligent design. Later, he moves on to the philosophy of science, explaining the difference between the theories of intelligent design and evolution: "Evolution may be 'just a theory,' but it has explanatory power comparable to the theory of gravity, whereas ID has been unproductive as a paradigm to generate new scientific knowledge" (p. 207).

One aspect of Hulsether's book that fell short was his effort to integrate hegemony studies into his analysis. In the introduction, he argues that a fruitful approach to studying American religion would incorporate cultural studies, since "[i]n earlier years, the lines between denominations represented sharper differences than they do today" (p. 7). Since different denominations blur into each other, a historian would have greater success comparing the cultural differences between religions, rather than doctrinal differences. Hulsether states his desire to explore "how religion is part of struggles for cultural hegemony" (p. 8). Yet, he never fully explains how hegemony studies have differed from cultural studies as a whole.

At some level, it is always unfair to tell an author what he ought to have done that he did not. This book, however, would have been enriched had it covered religion and the First Amendment. The First Amendment plays a huge role in current religious and cultural conflicts in America. Consider the Westboro Baptist Church, for example, and how, under the protection of the Bill of Rights, it protests the funerals of American soldiers. It would have been illuminating to read more about the First Amendment's role in past disputes. Hulsether also mentions the Puritans' search for religious freedom in the New World, but he might have fleshed out his position by including more information about how the Constitution later enshrined that freedom.

Overall, Hulsether's book succeeds as a cultural history, providing a detailed map guiding readers through the thicket of faiths and belief systems in 20th-century America. Hulsether is a skilled guide who knows the rough terrain well, and he is able to point out interesting features along the path. For those interested in religion as culture in America, this is a worthwhile read.