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**Sean McCloud.** *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955-1993.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 288 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5496-9.

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When the Jonestown massacre occurred in 1978, religious extremism moved into the mainstream. Rather than ignoring the story of a small, extreme religious group, every newspaper in the United States carried the story of the Reverend Jim Jones as front-page news. A subject once relegated to the back pages of the newspaper or to the Saturday section next to notices for church suppers, religious news achieved headline-making status.

Sean McCloud's *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955-1993* charts that development. Perhaps more importantly, McCloud's book gives the reader a historical framework in which to view religious trends and new religious movements in the contemporary United States. It also traces the trajectory of reportage in national magazines such as *Look*, *Life* and *Newsweek*, and in others such as *Christianity Today*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and the *National Review*. Such an analysis contributes appreciably to our understanding of the sociology of religion and of how media institutions shape our perceptions of "fringe" and "mainstream" alike.

McCloud is careful to point out that the book is not about "fringe religions [themselves] but about the characteristics that many of the largest and most influential magazines attributed to groups that they labeled fringe" (p. 2). In other words, relying on Marshall McLuhan's more popular concept of the "medium is the message," the act of negatively labeling a group as a "cult," "fringe," or "sect" is sufficient to create a marginal identity from both the individual and societal viewpoints.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, periodicals such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* discussed the "California cults" and the "Third Force in Christendom" in terms of exoticism and the subversion of decent American morals. In contrast to the reportage on the members of mainstream religions, magazine writers seldom portrayed members of smaller, less-known religious sects individually but more as a mass of fanatical "true believers" (p. 3).

For example, *Life* magazine editors in 1958 published an essay describing "Third Force" religions as "gospel-singing, doomsday-preaching sects" apart from "historic Protestantism" and traditional Roman Catholicism (p. 25). In 1956, *Newsweek* editors referred in an essay to numerous "sects in the Los Angeles area â¦ odd-looking to almost anybody who does not live in southern California" (p. 26).

McCloud, a professor of religion and modern culture at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, also argues that the media determine how religious groups are perceived and that corporate-owned media, whose

top executives usually come from the religious mainstream, have a vested interest in presenting the so-called marginal groups in a far from positive way. (One rarely reads or hears about a top executive from General Electric, which owns NBC, becoming part of a semi-monastic cult or joining the Hare Krishnas.) In this way, reportage is slanted against the more fringe religions.

McCloud does a persuasive job of arguing that identification of a "fringe"–an outer limit of tolerance–not only played a key role in defining parameters of acceptable religion but also delineated boundaries for "identity formation" (p. 6), that is, determining how an individual constructs his or her social identity. One knows what is "out of bounds" by knowing what is "in bounds." When they represent some groups dismissively, the media create an us-versus-them mentality that makes it illegitimate for persons to join those groups and maintain societal respectability.

Another of the book's strengths is McCloud's ability to relate the reporting on fringe religious groups with the undulating waves of history and social trends over a thirty-nine year period. The book examines the historical association in the 1950s and 1960s between the anti-democratic view of a "godless" communism and religious cultism: both involved charismatic leaders who undermined the kind of rugged American individualism that was best represented by mainstream Protestantism. Whether people supported Nikita Khrushchev, Fidel Castro, or Krishna Venta, who was killed in 1958, they were not following the American ethos of each man making it for himself, but capitulating to an "all mouths feed each other" norm that was considered un-American. Similarly, the all-powerful leaders of the "cults" or Pentecostal movements were seen as disruptive of American individualism. While operating on American soil, they were seen as despotic, foreign, and un-American.

By the late 1960s and 1970s, with the civil rights movement, Woodstock, and the counterculture movement, a softening occurred with respect to how the media reported vast group movements. *Time* and *Life* discarded the "Cold War view" of a "faultless, unified American culture" (p. 100). In 1970, *Life* declared that "never before in history has a single society taken up such a wide range of religious and near-religious systems at once" (p. 113). Many theologians viewed this era as the beginning of a "Fourth Great Awakening." Hence, the emerging plurality of religions was no longer viewed as an external menace but as possibly acceptable.

The Jonestown massacre reversed this trend. Reportage on the despotic Jim Jones who made his followers drink cyanide potions echoed the depictions of fringe religions in the "un-American" Cold War past. *Time* and *Newsweek* titled their covers that week "The Cult of Death" (p. 155). By 1979, journalists more frequently discussed cults as including "brainwashing, criminality and violence" (p. 153). There was little positive reportage on New Age religions in this era.

In the final sections, McCloud gives us a sympathetic portrayal of the acceptance of Buddhism, transcendental meditation, and New Age paganism on the American scene in the 1990s. No longer tied to post-McCarthy politics, these movements have achieved a more "separate but unequal" status. They are still viewed with suspicion but are portrayed as less dangerous to American political ideology than movements of the past. By 2002, greater acceptance of religious pluralism had occurred. New family structures, gay rights, and more communal social structures became acceptable in the post-millennial world, and reporters and editors changed their depictions of the fringe to mirror its acceptability.

In some ways, McCloud's book covers territory similar to Claire Badaracco's *Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion and Culture* (2005). Indeed, that collection of essays reflects on the theme of how the media report an event and how even the language used in news coverage determines how a lay audience experiences a religion. However, Badaracco's book takes McCloud's thesis one step further, arguing that while outsiders experience a faith through the reportage, insiders also depend on the press for instructions on how to proceed. Hence, the Dalai Lama's followers in the diaspora depend on television broadcasts of him for their own internal viewpoint of what they should be doing. In other words, the media achieve parity with the religious leader–a clear rise in status and power.

McCloud's book stops short of this conclusion, but there is a logical connection between his book and the other literature on religion and the media. Once an esoteric subject of ridicule, cultism has moved into mainstream reportage–a theme that McCloud successfully conveys to his audience. *Making the American Religious Fringe* is informative to lay readers as well as to students of journalism, sociology, and theology.

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