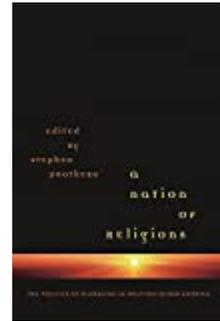


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Stephen Prothero, ed. *A Nation of Religions: The Politics of Pluralism in Multireligious America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 296 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3052-9; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5770-0.



Reviewed by Sylvie Grenet (Anthropology Department of the French Ministry of Culture)

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I live and work in France, a country boasting the reconciliation of three antagonistic issues; first, France is the Catholic Church's "eldest daughter"; second, France claims to have more or less invented a common public space where religion is excluded (*laïcité* as we call it, translated as "secularism" in English); and, finally, the country also serves as a refuge for asylum seekers—and therefore religions—from all persecuted countries throughout the world. This model seemed to work until, in 1989, three young Muslim girls from a Parisian suburb began going to school wearing veils and were subsequently suspended, creating a furor that has not entirely died down. For the first time, the French were confronted with religious diversity that emanated from migrating communities; this diversity impeded on the public space, at the same time that the migrants were attempting to affirm themselves within that space.

A Nation of Religions came to me at the right moment. As a researcher in the Anthropology Department of the French Ministry of Culture, I am now working on the relationship between heritage, religious rites, and the ceremonies practiced by various religious groups settled in France. This project raises crucial issues, such as whether or not rites are potential weapons for the reinforcement of a given community's claim to its own originality or even supremacy. As a civil servant of the central state (as

opposed to the French equivalent of local governments), this threat is almost a nightmare to me. On my (few) bad days, I am sometimes caught in the threads of a bad dream, where I fear that the lay community, which took two centuries to settle, is on the verge of being shattered by sectarian hatreds. I was looking for a new perspective and this book enabled me to glimpse a world that is much more subtle than I had previously thought, and, indeed, that might give me some answers to more specifically French challenges.

The editor, Stephen Prothero, is chair of the Department of Religion and director of the Graduate Division of Religious and Theological Studies at Boston University. His aim is to analyze how the religious diversity of the United States is transforming the public arena. As he states in his introduction, religion literally shapes the public and private lives of many American citizens. Contrary to the situation in France, being a religious person and showing an attachment to religion does not separate one from the mainstream in the United States, rather such behavior is a sign of social integration. While religion sets people apart in France, it gives them respectability in the United States. Yet, in some ways, the United States faces a similar challenge to the one confronted in France. American identity is at least partially based on the notion of the melting pot, the idea that the United States is a na-

tion of people coming from various parts of the world, uniting under the U.S. flag. At the beginning, there were mostly Christians, but then came Jews and, with new immigration legislation in 1965, newcomers from other religions: Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs. As a result, as Prothero puts it, “the American values of the Enlightenment and the Judeo-Christian religion are bumping against the values of Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism” (p. 7).

The twelve essays in this volume, divided into five sections, attempt to shed light on the complex challenges posed by increased religious diversity in the United States. The first three parts are dedicated to an examination of the Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Sikh religions. The fourth section deals with legal answers given by the American judicial system to various religious issues, and the fifth part serves as a conclusion. The first three sections form around 80 percent of the book. They are cleverly balanced between general sociological studies and more precise anthropological analyses.

The first section is dedicated to Islam and contains two articles, one by Ihsan Bagby, co-author of the first comprehensive study of mosques in the United States, and the other by Omid Safi, associate professor of Islamic studies at the University of North Carolina. Bagby’s essay, “Isolate, Insulate, Assimilate,” adopts a sociological approach in order to examine Muslim attitudes toward the United States. He gives us precise tables showing that Muslims adopt three different attitudes: isolation, insulation (living for oneself, in one’s own community), and assimilation. Some of the results are surprising, especially for a French observer looking at the United States, post-September 11. For example, Bagby found that many Muslims, whether foreign immigrants or converts, believe that “America is the best place to practice Islam” (p. 38), especially in comparison to what they consider the absence of liberty and the widespread corruption in many Muslim countries. Bagby gives a very subtle portrait of Muslims in the United States, oscillating between the temptation of assimilation and the urge to retain their religious identity.

Omid Safi’s essay, “Progressive Islam in America,” offers another perspective, equally surprising from the perspective of a French observer. His aim is both to define progressive Islam in America and to tell us how he, a progressive Islamist, can respond to American issues and to September 11. He strongly supports an engaged vision of peace and love, stating “progressive Muslims are the heirs of both Muslim visionaries such as the great mys-

tic Rumi ... and recent exemplars of nonviolence such as Gandhi, King, and the Dalai Lama” (p. 56). Here, in my opinion, his personal point of view seems to overshadow what should remain an objective analysis. This undermines part of his argument.

The second section deals with Buddhism and presents three essays, the first examines Buddhism in America from a historical perspective, the second adopts an anthropological approach, and the third is more personal and subjective than academic. In “Lessons from the Internment of Japanese American Buddhists,” D. R. Williams recounts the shameful internment of 110,000 Japanese Americans following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. Rather than focusing on the camp experience itself, Williams examines how internment prompted Japanese prisoners to reshape and readjust their expressions of faith (by eliminating the swastika from the dharma, for example), thus paving the way for a protestantization of Buddhism. Drawing an interesting parallel to the present, Williams stresses how the episode was remembered in the aftermath of September 11, when the FBI seized many South Asians for questioning. Unfortunately, Williams does not go further in his analysis, and does not give us a detailed answer to one question, which, for me, is crucial: why, after the violence committed against Muslims and South Asians, did President Bush issue a declaration underscoring the virtues of Islam? Was it because his team wanted to avoid the hysteria that took place during World War II? To put it another way, in what measure did the Japanese internment camps help alleviate, or moderate, the official attitude towards Muslims sixty years later?

The second essay, by Hien Duc Do, is the most interesting of the three. He gives us a very detailed analysis of San Jose’s Perfect Harmony Temple, founded by a Vietnamese nun who fled her country and built the temple out of nothing. Hien Duc does not bury his story in minutia, yet shows us how the temple, far from isolating its members from their new country, plays a key role in assimilating migrant populations into American society.

In chapter 5, Robert Thurman offers a brief—and clear—historical outline of the introduction of Buddhism into the United States (mainly through the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, of which he was himself a member). To my mind, however, he does not show us how Buddhism—and more specifically Tibetan Buddhism—is in a position to reinforce the American ideal of pluralism. His essay is passionate, and I am not at ease in analyzing it, since this way of writing aca-

democratic essays is different from what we are used to in France. Thurman eventually states that Tibetan Buddhism is the ultimate alternative to all western issues, “challenging the sciences, medicine, ethics, governance, education, aesthetics and arts” (p.101), but he does not go deeper than that, and leaves us wondering about what he really means.

The third section examines the Hindu and Sikh communities in the United States. In chapter 6, Prema A. Kurien portrays what happened to Hindus, both before and after September 11, 2001, through an interesting analysis of the petition addressed to President Bush and the content of various Internet discussion groups. This angle is compelling, since Internet discussion groups are a fascinating way of analyzing people’s responses to climactic events, such as September 11. Kurien sheds an interesting light on the importance of assimilation in Hindu rhetoric and speech.

In chapter 7, Vasudha Narayanan stresses the sacralization of places in the United States, which, after having been sanctified by Hindu migrating communities, become places that can be appropriated by Hindus. For example, American rivers become the equivalent of the Ganges, and American mountains become the dwelling places of Hindu Gods. Assimilation occurs through the re-appropriation of a foreign land that becomes a place on which the community can find religious equivalents.

In chapter 8, “Making Home Abroad,” Gurinder Singh Mann examines the difficulties faced by Sikhs when trying to assimilate into American society. Despite being among the wealthiest social group in the United States, Mann argues that Sikhs face significant challenges because of their adoption of traditional modes of dress, a style on the verge of clashing with American norms. Mann shows that physical appearance, especially when associated with minority religious cultures, can place groups in danger—a fact tragically illustrated by the death of a Sikh man who was mistaken for a Muslim after September 11.

The fourth section, “Church, Mosque, Temple, and State,” offers a very interesting view of government responses to religious phenomena. In chapter 9, C. Bender and J. Snow analyze the 1965 Immigration Act, which opened the gates of the United States to migrants and religious groups from all parts of the world. The authors show how the courts adopted a rather broad interpretation of religious liberty. Their conclusion is clear cut: “the courts continue to posit a ‘reasonable observer’ for whom the religious symbols and ideas of both majority

and minority can coexist but only insofar as religious symbols serve as mnemonic devices to remind Americans of both our diverse cultural origins and the political state that supersedes them all” (p. 204).

In the last article, Stephen Dawson examines the “controversy over the installation (and subsequent removal) of a 2.5-ton granite monument of the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of the Alabama State Judicial Building” (p. 209). This essay goes beyond a mere analysis of the case, since Dawson praises what he calls a plurality of solutions (p. 224). He asserts that traditional liberals “should aim more modestly at a *modus vivendi* among people holding different beliefs and values” (p. 224). This position poses a challenging question: can laws, peculiar to states of a particular land and therefore special religious traditions, really be adapted to the diversity of religions and to the inevitable variety of conceptions of the world that they carry with them?

The conclusion is composed of two chapters, one by Stephen Warner and the other by J. D. Hunter and D. Franz. While both are interesting, they do not expand significantly on early chapters. Warner’s essay, dealing with the “de-Europeanization of American Christianity,” might have been a good complement to Prothero’s introduction, but comes too late in the volume to be of any real use. Hunter and Franz’s article serves as a good conclusion, but does not substantively add to questions about assimilation, cultural differences, and responses to difference or to the sacred in a land welcoming all sorts of people that are raised earlier in the book.

In conclusion, I would say that, despite some flaws (mainly due to the difficulty of finding homogeneous contributors), this book does give a new insight on how the United States re-invented—and is still re-inventing—the notion of the melting-pot. The main asset of Prothero’s book is to show how the religious diversity of migrating communities is being transformed by American society, while, at the same time, slowly changing American values and beliefs. Together, these transformations contribute to the construction of a new nation, much more complex than could be thought at first sight. This book opened a new perspective for me, regarding the re-shaping of French nationality. We, in France, consider religion to be a private matter. But what if we, as in the United States, eventually had the courage to put them in the public sphere? Would it not bring a solution to our problems, once we had admitted that relegating religion in the private sphere, far from uniting people, may well pull them apart and shatter the very idea of nation?

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