

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert Wuthnow. *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. ix + 277 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-21396-8.

Reviewed by Philip Jenkins (Religious Studies Program, Pennsylvania State University)

Published on H-AmRel (November, 1998)

Eternal Realities?

Robert Wuthnow is justly celebrated as one of the most insightful and critical observers of contemporary American religious life. He is also remarkably prolific, and in the last five years alone has produced major studies like *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century*, *The Crisis in the Churches*, and *God and Mammon in America*. In various ways, all these books explore the tectonic shifts which have affected American spirituality since the supposed golden age of organized religion in the 1950s, and which collectively can be seen as marking a fundamental shift in cultural consciousness. *After Heaven* summarizes these long-term trends, above all the decline of the “dwelling-oriented spirituality” of mid-century, which found expression in denominations, houses of worship and neighborhoods, all of which were portrayed as extensions of the spiritualized household. Wuthnow is particularly evocative in describing this era, which has acquired something of the character of a mythical paradise, when the mainstream denominations boomed, and when church attendance figures soared. This comfortable spiritual tradition entered a period of deep crisis after about 1965, with the collapse of moral and political certainties, and the precipitous decline of the older denominations. Often, traditional authority was most vigorously undermined by conflicts over sexual issues, including contraception, abortion, and homosexuality. Meanwhile, dwelling-oriented spirituality was supplanted by individualistic and seeker-oriented belief systems unwilling to be constrained by doctrinal orthodoxies, and these experimental ideas continue to thrive today. Though it is

not perhaps quite as novel or unprecedented as Wuthnow suggests, the seekers’ quest must be understood by anyone wishing to appreciate the religious dimensions of modern American culture.

Wuthnow makes a commendable effort to present seeker spirituality as both important and worthy of serious scholarly attention. Though the ideas are sometimes regarded as hopelessly fluffy, the massive contemporary interest in topics like angels and near-death experiences in fact bespeaks a widespread thirst for non-denominational encounters with the other-worldly (I would add alien abductions as another example of this kind of manifestation). Joyously eclectic, the new spirituality is heavily influenced by psychology and therapy movements as well as by many of the New Age ideas which surfaced in the 1960s. In turn, recovery movements increasingly acquire many of the features which would once have denoted a religious sect, so that the boundaries between religion and therapy become ever more porous. Seekers practice a “cafeteria” approach, which appropriates beliefs and symbols with little regard to the traditions from which they originate, provided that they seem suitable for the individual doing the selection, and are useful in the continuing daily struggles against economic crises, marital failure, and substance abuse. The seeker movement, if such it can be termed, finds institutional expression in the small groups previously studied by Wuthnow in his earlier *Sharing the Journey*.

As in his previous books, Wuthnow tells his story by means of individual case-studies, which often make for fascinating reading, and which remind us time and again of the inadequacy of denominational labels. The individual cases also offer hair-raising warnings for scholars seeking to quantify denominational strength by means of surveys. It is precisely this decline of frontiers which causes such alarm among some groups fearful of the eclectic approach, from the conservative enemies of “cafeteria Catholicism” to Jews alarmed at the sharp rise in intermarriage, and perhaps the ultimate obliteration of an identifiable Jewish community in North America. Like all extrapolations, these fears are presumably exaggerated, but we can scarcely deny Wuthnow’s basic contention about the shifting grounds of American religion.

Having said this, I would not agree that the “seeker” mode is as new as Wuthnow suggests, but would rather see it as an enduring fact of American life, one which is more evident in some periods than others, but which is never wholly absent. When reading *After Heaven*, we have to recall its self-imposed limitations of period, which is avowedly “since the 1950s” throughout, modern conditions are being compared with that precise era, and not, as some might suppose, with the whole previous history of American religion. Contrary to popular belief, the pattern of American religion between about 1948 and 1963 was by no means “normal” for the nation’s history, but was quite odd in many ways: in the very strong position occupied by the so-called “mainline” churches, in the very high figures for church membership in those years, and in the relative invisibility of fringe groups of the sort generally labeled “cults.” If we choose another baseline for comparison with present day conditions, then we would perhaps note far fewer differences between the 1990s and, say, the 1880s or 1920s. Through most of the nineteenth century, for example, church members represented a very small minority of the overall population. While religious matters certainly have changed since the 1950s, we must ask whether it is our own “seeking” era which is odd and atypical of American history, or if in fact it was the Eisenhower years which marked the radical deviation. The 1950s were emphatically not representative of the whole American past, and perhaps the changes portrayed by Wuthnow just represent a return to the historical norm: dare I suggest that unfocused “seeking” is, and always has been, at the heart of American religion.

To illustrate this point, we might consider the years between about 1915 and 1940, which were such a great era for fringe religions and metaphysical movements,

many of which (then as now) offered healing for both body and soul. Most appealed chiefly to women, who felt their voices were not sufficiently heard within the established denominations. As in the “cultish” 1970s, very few individuals actually pulled up stakes and migrated to a commune in the wilderness, but millions had fleeting contacts with various New Thought and occult movements, the most successful of which included the I AM and Psychiana organizations of the 1930s. Both attracted millions of subscribers and curious observers, who exhibited precisely the same kind of “cafeteria” approach to religion, spirituality and pseudo-science which Wuthnow depicts as so characteristic of the recent baby boomers, the same package of non-sectarian Mysticism Lite. It was a small-town woman character in Sinclair Lewis’ 1920 novel *Main Street* who has an interest in “every doggone kind of New Thought and Bahai and Swami and Hoopedoodle meeting you can find.” By the 1930s, several mail-order operations were offering the wisdom of the ancients to the curious masses, and some actually offered the opportunity to rise through grades of mystic initiation in the privacy of one’s home, through correspondence courses. This suggests that a deeply individual and privatized kind of seeking spirituality existed long before the epoch of Bishop Sheen and Norman Vincent Peale.

And these eclectic mystical ideas continued through the supposed height of “dwelling-oriented” spirituality. In his classic 1958 book *California Cult*, H. T. Dohrman wrote in surprisingly contemporary terms that “In the overall cult world, a person might simultaneously belong to the Technocrats and the Rosicrucians, he might attend flying saucer conventions in Hollywood hotels, in the meantime he might maintain his membership in the Mother Church of Christian Science, while becoming familiar with stellar healing, induced emotion, and extrasensory perception at the Religion of the Stars services.” The typical believer “prides himself in his freedom from bigotry. His aim, he will tell you, is to obtain the truth.... he knows something about the Lemurians, the Rosicrucians, the Technocratic, the Mormons, the Anglo-Israelites, I AM, New Thought, Unity, Theosophy, Yoga, Hermetics, Metaphysics, pyramidology, spiritualism, the OAH SPE Bible, faith-healing, flying saucers and the latest metaphysical innovations ... selecting what seem to him to be pertinent tidbits of knowledge, he adds them to his stock of cultic convictions.” How familiar it all seems.

These historical caveats do not in the slightest detract from the value of Wuthnow’s eminently readable book, which is perhaps at its best in its final chapter, “The Prac-

tice of Spirituality.” Here, the author advocates a spiritual approach different from both the “dwelling” and “seeking” traditions, and which emphasizes instead a revival of the best traditions of private prayer, meditation and other exercises, ideally in a setting which is communal, if not congregational. We must pay attention “to specific spiritual practices by those who desire to live their whole lives as practice... the point of spiritual practice is not to elevate an isolated set of activities over the rest of life but

to electrify the spiritual impulse that animates all of life” (p. 198). Throughout *After Heaven*, spirituality is seen not as a tiny corner of existence, but as a central aspect of life and culture, and it is this comprehensive vision which makes the book so appealing.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amrel>

Citation: Philip Jenkins. Review of Wuthnow, Robert, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*. H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. November, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2521>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.