On writing the religious history of America

By Puritans Possessed

Sidney E. Mead

I have been told that when Charles de Gaulle was asked what something he had said would mean to an ordinary Frenchman, he replied, "I do not know, I'm not an ordinary Frenchman." Similarly, I suppose I am not an ordinary reader of this book, A Religious History of the American People (Yale University Press; 1158 + xvi pp.; $19.95), but one who has for many years been surveying the same hills and valleys that Sydney Ahlstrom has traversed with camera and notebook. But while I have worked more as a topographer with the hope of making a usable map for the guidance of any who might wish to follow, Ahlstrom has pulled together an imposing slide show of the terrain and its inhabitants—a travelogue made up of thousands of discrete snapshots given unity primarily by the fact that all were taken by the same historically conditioned person.

Through his "Puritan" eyes we see an astounding number of the distinct features of the country and sometimes are left wondering about the relation between what appear to be mutually exclusive pictures of the same person or event. We are told, for example, that Jonathan Edwards infused "the spirit of the Age of Reason into the faith of his fathers" and yet remained "utterly captive to the Reformed tradition" as he "knew it through the Synod of Dort, the Westminster Assembly, and his Puritan Forebears." The decade of the 1920's, during which "the climactic confrontation of American evangelical Protestantism and modern thought" took place and "speaking out" on public issues [was heard] with monotonous regularity," is nevertheless characterized as one of "prevailing complacency." And neo-orthodoxy is said to have had a "deep respect for the scientific, scholarly, and artistic achievements of men," although its theologians "ignored many intellectual difficulties" and "have been justifiably accused of putting down only a very thin sheet of dogmatic asphalt over the problems created by modern critical thought."

Borrowing concepts from A.N. Whitehead's Adventures of Ideas, historians may fruitfully be seen as distributing themselves across a spectrum from scholarship to speculation or, what I think to be the same thing, from those who practice the discipline as a craft to those who practice it as a profession. Scholarship is characterized by its strict attention to accepted methodologies, a stance that defines the craftsman. Speculation is characterized by flashes of intuition that stimulate continual analysis of the purposes of the avocation of a kind that leads to the modification and adaptation of the means (methods) for the attainment of those purposes, the stance that defines the professional approach. On the continuum, Whitehead notes, pure speculation is more useless than pure scholarship—in other words, the professional lives on the scholar.

In this context Ahlstrom's book is a weighty example of scholarly craftsmanship. One has merely to pick it up to know that it deserves the encomium of one reviewer—"unparalleled in its comprehensive"—"simply astounding" in its "thoroughness"—a quantitative thoroughness that accounts for its 1158 + xvi pages and 4 1/2 pounds. For sheer size its closest rival is the work of that evangelical scholar Joseph Belecher, D. D., published in 1854 (The Religious Denominations in the United States: Their History, Doctrine, Government and Statistics. With a Preliminary Sketch of Judaism, Paganism and Mohammedanism), which, with its 1024 + 4 pages, weighs in at four pounds, six ounces and has the added attraction of being "embellished with nearly two hundred engravings."

Unfortunately for such expansive ventures, unusual size may have its drawbacks. Even though Ahlstrom acknowledges the danger of "becoming a

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hopelessly unreadable catalogue of names and dates,” on little more than half of page 597 he drops twenty names—ten names on a page is not infrequent. One of Ahlstrom’s illustrious ancestors in the Yale Divinity School, Nathaniel William Taylor (professor of theology 1822-1858), complained that no one could understand him until his book was published, and then it would be so long that no one would read it. From perusal of some of the three-hundred-word instant reviews of Ahlstrom’s book that the journals of the scholars’ clubs now commonly demand and an author’s fellow members readily provide, one may well infer that Taylor’s complaint was well-founded, and Dr. Belcher, whom Ahlstrom does not list among his weighty predecessors, might feel like commending Taylor’s prescience.

This is not meant to suggest that Ahlstrom slights his indebtedness. On the contrary, almost all of the seventeen pages of preface and introduction are devoted to spelling out his status as “the legatee of an awesome body of scholarship” that demands an explanation of why “anyone in the 1970’s... would again venture a general history of American religion. ...” His answer is that “Post-Protestant [a concept somewhat tarnished since its faddish radiance in the early 1960’s] America requires an account of its spiritual past that seeks to clarify its spiritual present. And such an account,” he continues, “should above all do justice to the fundamentally pluralistic situation which has been struggling to be born ever since this country was formally dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

This is a distortion. Actually, of course, that “pluralistic situation” was born long before the Declaration and, indeed, because the colonials had experience with it ever since two persons of different religious perspectives landed on the continent with intention to stay, they were prepared to see that if there was to be a united states its government would have to guarantee its perpetuation. Pluralism was of the essence of the colonial experience, as well as of the national, and awareness of it tends to blunt the edge of Ahlstrom’s implication that his work is “a new, synthetic effort,” although no one will doubt that it is “on a fairly large scale.”

As one whom Ahlstrom notes among “a new generation of American church historians” that followed “in the train of Sweet,” I am not sure what he means by saying that “a disproportionate number... had some connection with the 'Chicago School.'” But the “disproportionate” gives a faint pejorative aroma to the remark and led one of my students to wonder if Ahlstrom set out to balance the scale for the Ivy League with a book of superlative weight.

However that may be, perhaps the obvious explanation of what seems to puzzle him in this respect is that for many years after he came to Chicago in 1927 Sweet was the only Professor of American Church History in the world. This at a time when many Church historians in the seminaries argued that the only reason students turned to American Church History was that they did not have, and probably lacked, the intelligence to acquire the scholarly skills necessary to tackle Church History as duly constituted—ancient, medieval and Reformation. When I took the survey of Church History at Yale Divinity School in 1934-1935, the professor let it be known that his knowledge extended barely beyond 1600, and American religious developments were expounded by the Dean out of what an irreverent transfer student from Chicago called “Uncle Luther’s picture book.” Meantime Sweet consistently tried to distinguish “the story of religion(s) in America” from traditional Church or religious history, in the attempt to develop, as he said, a neglected dimension of American history.

Of course Sweet was not the first to cultivate the field at Chicago in this fashion. He developed the field that had been surveyed, plowed, fertilized and planted by Peter Mode, whose 735+xiv page Source Book and Bibliographical Guide for American Church History (1921) and 196+x page The Frontier Spirit in American Christianity (1923) Ahlstrom unfortunately fails to notice, for they would have called his attention to that environmentalist, or social-historical, method of doing history that had long flourished in the Divinity School of “Harper’s university”—the approach that provided the context in which Mode’s pioneering work flourished and, to switch back to Ahlstrom’s figure, knowledge of which makes Sweet appear not so much the locomotive as the baggage car of the train made up of that disproportionate number of us who have rumbled over the rails of Clio after him. During the heyday of Sweet’s work in the Divinity School at Chicago a more theologically oriented interest in America’s religious past (particularly in Puritanism) was likewise fermenting in the English Department. This movement culminated in the 1940’s in the work of Clarence Faust. This is the context that seems to have stimulated what someone has called Perry Miller’s vast excavation of the Puritan mind. Knowledge of this context makes one wonder about Ahlstrom’s comment that Miller (who got his Ph. D. degree at Chicago) “had a link to Chicago” that may have been only coincidental.

In the title of Ahlstrom’s book the word religious is an adjective. This is a work written from a definable religious perspective—from within “religion’s temple,” as William Clebsch defines sacred history. The anchor points of the theological axis of that perspective are “Jonathan Edwards and the Renewal of New England Theology” (295-313) and “The Essence of Neo-Orthodoxy,” a 3½ page section of the chapter on “Neo-Orthodoxy
Enlightenment is swallowed up in Puritanism and its significance is obliterated

and Social Crisis" (932-948). The umbrella term for this perspective is Puritanism, which is implicitly equated with Protestantism—for example, “Post-Protestant” in the title of the introduction (1-13) seems to mean the same thing as “Post-Puritan” in the title of Part IX (915-1096), which is primarily a catalog of non-Puritan Protestant groups.

From this viewpoint the religious history of the American people is the story of “a great Puritan Epoch . . . beginning in 1558 with the death of Mary Tudor, the last monarch to rule over an officially Roman Catholic England, and . . . ending in 1960 with the election of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the first Roman Catholic president of the United States” (1979, and see also 8: 1095). Whether one is to consider this interlude a valley between two mountains or a mountain between two valleys is not clear. But be that as it may, Puritanism, as Ahlstrom uses the concept, constitutes the exoskeleton of his work within which all significant religious developments are contained. It would seem that while overtly intending “to trace the stream of religious life in the United States to its many various sources” the author covertly suggests that there was but this one source. Puritanism is thus made normative as “the major element in America’s moral and religious heritage,” so it can be said that when “the Puritan heritage lost its hold on the leaders of public life . . . the mainstream denominations grew increasingly out of touch with classic Protestant witness,” and the churches were “led . . . directly into the complacent culture-protestantism of the 1920’s.” This interpretation, which was familiar in the 1950’s and 1960’s, has many difficulties, but they are so well known that it is needless to speak of them here.

The normative application of this thesis (e.g., “that America had a divine commission in the world”—it is implied—was peculiarly “the Puritan’s firm conviction” [1065]) places Ahlstrom’s work in the tradition delineated by David W. Noble in developing his thesis “that the point of view of the modern American historian is directly related to the world view of the English Puritans who came to Massachusetts” (Historians Against History . . . , 3.) Noble’s point, illustrated by Ahlstrom’s approach, is that “just as the historian is the citizen who is most responsible for describing our American covenant, he is also the one most responsible for defending it” and in this sense is America’s “secular theologian,” accepting “the burden of warning the people when they stray from the purity and simplicity” of their true being and identity.

But Noble’s historian, unlike Ahlstrom, argued that “the Puritan concept of a Biblical commonwealth was replaced in the eighteenth century by the Enlightenment’s belief . . . that the new republic that emerged from the American Revolution had a covenant with nature . . .” This, in Crane Brinton’s sense, is to recognize that in the eighteenth century there arose in our society a new religion he is content to call “simply Enlightenment, with a capital E” (“Many Mansions,” AHR, January, 1964). It was this “new religion” of the founding fathers—who, as Ahlstrom notes, exhibited “essentially enlightened modes of understanding”—that provided the legitimation (or, in Peter Berger’s terminology, the “sacred canopy,” or “plausibility structure”) for the constitutional and legal structures of the new nation. This new religion offered for the first time in Christendom a religious alternative to orthodox Christianity (Ahlstrom’s Puritanism)—something clearly recognized by both Christian and Enlightenment leaders c. 1800. But Ahlstrom, while recognizing that “the Enlightenment’s overall accomplishment clearly constitutes a decisive modern rupture with the medieval tradition,” apparently does not see this as a radical religious rupture, perhaps because, while recognizing the Great Awakening as a “religious . . . event,” he sees the Enlightenment as only “a wide-sweeping intellectual revolution,” apparently outside religion’s temple, which provided a “philosophical basis for the work of the Founding Fathers.” Meantime, he argues, the revivals had “rejuvenated the politically potent elements of the Puritan ideology” and “the first ‘new nation’ never for a moment lost the Puritan’s sense of America’s special destiny,” suggesting again the thesis that such sense was exclusively Puritan.

This “Puritan Epoch” motif seems to provide the standard for judging the historical significance of everything in the religious history of the American people. It means that eighteen pages are devoted to Jonathan Edwards alone (285-313), while somewhat less than two pages are given to the sections on “Church-State Relations and Religious Freedom” (379-380). If we judge by listings in the index, we
note that it takes 17½ lines to list the references to Edwards, but John Adams, Jefferson, Madison and Franklin get less than a line each, and Enlightenment, Rationalism and Deism combined get about 15½ lines. The Declaration, Constitution, First Amendment and Fourteenth Amendment are not in the index at all. Of course index-makers are fallible, and a significant reference to Adams, Jefferson and Franklin on page 359 does not appear in the index. That reference occurs at the end of the chapter on "Provincial America and the Coming of the Enlightenment," which is devoted almost exclusively to noting European thinkers and ends by implying that because each of these three men "sought to express the new rationalism with complete intellectual integrity," religiously they "exemplified in a unique way the Puritan heritage."

Thus Enlightenment (in Brinton’s sense) is swallowed up in Puritanism (in Ahlstrom’s sense), and its significance in the American tradition as a religious alternative to the Christianity of the churches is obliterated. For this reason, whereas Michael Novak, reflecting a current interpretation hardly to be ignored, saw that "the religion of Enlightenment" is now "the dominant religion" in America and the "tradition in which intellectuals ordinarily define themselves," Ahlstrom sees in its manifestations only a "generalized religiosity," of which President Eisenhower was the "prestigious symbol" because he once declared that "our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is." This view, which has become a cliché from being so often parroted since Will Herberg popularized it in Protestant, Catholic, Jew in 1955, simply ignores the fact that in that statement "Ike" (and insofar, I like Ike!) therein spoke directly out of what Novak recognized as "the dominant religion" of America, using almost the exact words of Thomas Jefferson.

Of course from the sectarian Puritan perspective Ahlstrom here represents, Enlightenment (the religious legitimation of a pluralistic commonwealth) is merely the generalized religiosity or complacent culture-Protestantism that emerged in America only after "the Puritan heritage lost its hold on the leaders of public life." And this, it might be said, makes him the apparently unconscious legatee of Timothy Dwight and all those leaders of what is called the Second Great Awakening who, following 1795, by successfully marshalling the orthodox against the "vain and deceitful" blandishments of Paine’s and Jefferson’s type of "Infidelity" ("Enlightenment"), drove the structured theological legitimation of the Republic’s pluralistic way underground in America’s genteel Puritan culture, so far underground that 175 years later some can see it only as the generalized religiosity of their sad post-Protestant because post-Puritan world. The application of Ahlstrom’s Puritanism thesis to a massive interpretation of The Religious History of the American People suggests that they must now cry "Ichabod, saying, The glory is departed from [our] Israel; because the [Puritan] ark of God is taken" away.