

# Books

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## The Two Religions of America

Martin E. Marty

The writing of American religious history in the recent past has occurred between the Sy(i)dneyan poles of Ahlstrom and Mead. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, an historian who is at home with philosophical and theological themes, has paid particular attention to the religious groups in America while slighting what might be called the public philosophy. His *A Religious History of the American People* (1972) is a weighty 1,158-page compression of his viewpoint and findings; it may be regarded as a nearly normative statement of its viewpoint for decades to come. (Doubleday Image Books has just published a two-volume paperback version, \$3.50 each.)

Sidney E. Mead, a philosopher and theologian who makes use of historical data, embarked upon writing an "American church history that is to rise above denominationalism." First in *The Lively Experiment* (1963) and now in a somewhat random and sometimes repetitious collection of essays, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (Harper and Row; 158 pp.; \$7.95/\$3.95), Mead has stated his case for the "religion of the Republic."

Mead has written that when people hold differing worldviews it is difficult for them to understand or even communicate with one another. His new book illustrates the point. It is defensive and polemical, based on a fundamental misrepresentation of those he regards as his antagonists and on a fundamental confusion about the nature of pluralism in American religious history.

The polemical tone is regrettable, since it is directed against his admirers and students who have tried to keep the argument on the level that Mead set in his earlier book. For some reason he finds it important to call people in the Ahlstrom camp "sectarians," "Temple-ists," and "faddists." The last epithet is especially troubling, since it can be shown that not one of them has changed as much since the mid-fifties as has Mead. His largest sneer is for the "jet-set" of "post-Protestant faddists," led by sociologist Will Herberg. (Mead travels by automobile.) Those he

criticizes may jet, but they belong to no set. And people who write 1,158-page histories must be doing much of their jet-setting in classrooms and libraries.

All this has to do with a debate among academic historians; but it is also more than that. The issue reflects divisions in American life that will outlast the polemics. Under the snide tones of Mead's book there is a very serious and thoughtful address to the problems connected with those divisions. Mead could not be clearer than he is about the fact that "America's two religions" are in competition. Page 1: "There is, and always has been, an unresolved tension between the theology that legitimates the constitutional structure of the Republic and that generally professed and taught in a majority of the religious denominations of America." "[In] much teaching and several articles and lectures...I have hoped...to prod competent theologians into seeing the theological issue between the two (or more) religions." He has been on a "quest to discover and delineate *the* religion of the pluralistic culture in which I have lived and moved and had my being" and to defend himself against the temple-ists and sectarians who think that he is *advocating* a watered-down "Christianity (or religion) in general."

The temple-ists are "professional children of light" who represent a "Parson Thwackum approach" to "autobiographical sectarianism" in their "national tribal cults." Their religion is "un-American," their particularities are "practically meaningless," their clashes a threat to "domestic tranquillity," "if not to the political society itself."

Mead, himself an autobiographical thinker and writer, has here and elsewhere outlined his own pilgrimage. From a fundamentalist conversion to a career in a liberal divinity school to high Unitarian office he moved into the churches' "Alumni Association." In that fourth stage he outlined and propagated the religion of the Republic. The current book represents that stage, but it shows him moving into a fifth stage in which "the nation with the soul of a church" turns out to be only the local—shall we say sectarian?—embodiment of a cosmopolitan, universal theology. More recently, in essays that are unfortunately not included here, he has gone even further in his search for identity. He now speaks of man as "a planetary disease," and would find the matrix of values "not only [in] all 'living' things but all 'inorganic' matter as well." His "immense journey" leads to "the primordial chaos." He is a monist who ponders pluralism; "truth resides in the whole." He has been seeking the Unum, the One, the All.

America's temple-ists, on the other hand, may have been doing the same thing. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." In Christ, says the Christian, "all things hold together." While Mead himself admits that the religion of the Republic, one sect in his cosmopolitan and universal theology, was born in the American of about the 1760's and was swamped, as he puts it, by the Second Great Awakening following

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1795, he accurately observes that its philosophy is organically related to the basic American institutions and values and holds a privileged position. Arguing from that position, he misstates the particularists' case.

My interest in the area that I have called, now somewhat to my regret, the religion of the Republic, was sparked during the era of the "post-Protestant" fad among the jet-set theologians during the first part of the 1960s. It seemed to me then that the post-Protestant faddists, insiders all, were compounding several errors: that confrontation with religious pluralism was a new thing in America; that the concept of religion (or Christianity) "in general" was a twentieth-century emergent; and that the constitutional and legal structures of the United States were once particularistically Protestant.

The problem with all three charges is that they are not true. None of these errors can be found in the passages he cites nor, unless I have missed something, in other writings by the people he attacks. Mead creates "errors" by misreading or misstating others' positions. Since he is a clear thinker and, when not on the attack, a kindly man, he illustrates the problems of communicating across different worldviews. As Mead says, "the basic differences between historians...are theological and/or philosophical and cannot be resolved by historical methods."

Consider charge one, that his opponents say "confrontation with religious pluralism was a new thing in America." The fact is that numbers of the writers he criticizes have compared the American situation to the pluralism of the Roman Empire. It is true that (with Mead and largely under his influence) they have celebrated the Enlightenment-based charters for legal recognition of that pluralism. Or take charge two: his antagonists say "that the concept of religion (or Christianity) 'in general' was a twentieth-century emergent." Not true. They may speak of it as "the maturing of several processes," or a "*maturing national religion*," but they have all made it a fundamental point to say that it has been there from the beginning.

What was new was the situation in which Protestantism—which, as Mead himself noted, had "swamped" Enlightenment thought and had come to overwhelming churchly predominance early in the nineteenth century—was losing its privileged position. During the next century and a half, but most notably after World War II, the nation's historic legally based pluralism was being matched by an ethos in which fewer people regarded Protestantism as normative and in which they were trying to give expression to the more generalized faith that had been there from the first.

Finally, charge three: those he criticizes say "that the constitutional and legal structures of the United States were once particularistically Protestant." False. I would like to be shown one supporting text from Ahlstrom, Herberg, Winthrop Hudson, Marty, or anyone else he singles out. Mead says that Hudson's "definition of what he means is clear enough" and quotes

Hudson to the effect that Protestantism had once had "predominance and near monopoly of the religious life of the nation." Note there is no mention of Protestant constitutional and legal structures.

Mead next quotes Marty to the effect that America-as-Protestant meant that "insofar as *organized religion* was represented in the great central events that shaped America and have become part of its mystic core, Protestantism dominated" (emphasis mine). What about the neglect of the Enlightenment? Mead cites Marty again: spokespersons for the "*maturing national religion*" were "appropriating an authentic parcel of the American past" and were "more accurate in their reading of the founding fathers" than were unthinking Christians who "try to make Protestants out of them" and who "try to theologize all the basic documents of our national history on Christian lines." This, of course, is precisely the opposite of what Mead claims I say—even though he is the one who reproduces the passage. He quotes me further to the effect that, in relation to "the substratum of assumptions underlying the Declaration, etc.," "America never was Protestant; it was rationalist." In the face of such evidence to the contrary, he still accuses us of leaving "the impression that the United States was *once Protestant in every respect*" (emphasis mine). The faddists' view, says Mead, rests on the premise that the United States was once a Protestant nation also in "what may be called the theology of the Republic." He cites no texts in support. There are none.

So much for the misrepresentation. Now for the root of the confusion. "Mead is a Monist." That will make no graffiti or bumper sticker, nor does it refer to anything immoral. Those he attacks may very well be monists as well. What he and they do about the evident pluralism within history is what separates their worldviews. Readers of Mead have often been thrown off the track by his legal defenses of religious pluralism. This is only the kind of pluralism described by Ernest Gellner as "the view that a plurality of countervailing forces, groups and institutions is the best aid toward the maintenance of both liberty and order." But Mead's immense journey toward primordial chaos (the Whole, the One) looks beyond pluralism, and that is what motivates his philosophy/theology.

There are quite different ways of addressing the reality of pluralism. John Courtney Murray gave classic statement to a Catholic style of engagement with American life: "Religious pluralism is against the will of God. But it is the human condition; it is written into the script of history." It is ironical that Roman Catholics, who are largely ignored in Mead's work—there are three index references to Catholics in a book that is subtitled "The Shaping of Christianity in America"!—turn out to be the most particularistic sectarians or temple-ists by his kind of measure, while at the same time they are capable of embracing much of "the religion of the Republic" through refinements of natural law teaching. Many Protestants and Jews work

with cognate approaches, but Mead overlooks this. Nor does he reckon with eschatological views in which the immense journey is undertaken in the midst of a sometimes troubling and sometimes helpful pluralism.

The Deism or Enlightenment rationalism that makes up Mead's canon within the American canon appeared to be universalistic. Yet even in his telling it survived as an articulated philosophy for only about a century. Mead is correct: it "provides or legitimates the premises of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and a long line of Supreme Court decisions on matters pertaining to religion." No temple-ist that he cites wants to take that away from it or him.

Mead, at least implicitly, would impose tests of orthodoxy. In the key essay he quotes G.K. Chesterton to the effect that America is the nation with the soul of a church because it is "founded on a creed" that is "set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence." Does Chesterton's having said this make it true? But to the degree that it is true—and there are good reasons for going a long way with it—how does it contradict what most of the temple-ists believe about that creed alongside their "particularistic" creeds? Few Americans have sensed much abrasion. Mead sees in the nation what he cannot see in any church, that "in the depth of every living religion there is a point at which the religion itself loses its importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity, elevating it to spiritual freedom and with it to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man's

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existence" (Tillich). Or, if he sees it in any church, none of the churches get credit.

Mead performs an excellent service in pointing out that many temple-ists applied harsh standards in judging the religion of the Republic. He properly notes that when they were being considered prophetic, they were comparing church religion at its best (eighth century BCE prophets and Jesus) with civic religion at its worst. He pays less attention to the fact that all those he criticizes have been *more* critical of the current state of their churches' religion than of societal religion. His other great service was to present the best historically informed apology for what has come to be called civil religion in America. Those two achievements will not be lost simply because of his misreading of the alternative faiths in America.

Mead's book includes frequent altar calls. The citizenry, he says, must choose between two opinions. Three times (pages 33, 37, 115) he uses precisely the same terms: "religious commitment is an all-or-nothing matter" (or business). Politically and psychologically Mead is sympathetic to pluralism; philosophically he says, in effect: "you do things your way; I'll do things God's way."

The public has chosen and has not chosen. It has chosen to remain, by and large, faithful to the religion of the temple-ists. Yet it has also undergirded and overarched it—Herberg's colorful images!—or at least paralleled it with assent to much of the Enlightenment faith that is bonded to our charter documents and basic institutions. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote: "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." In this light, the Americans have been a people of genius, whose terms for plural belonging tend to elude us historians on both sides of the issue.

The two creeds do not necessarily conflict at all on even most points; there can be overlapping and mutual confirmation. But some conflicts there are, and people live with them rather creatively. Not so, in Mead's eye. He thinks that only a "psychosomatic indigestion" can prevail, "resulting from an inability either to digest the theology on which the practice of religious freedom rests or to regurgitate its practice." This is the view of the monist who expects a certain neatness in history. Can it not also be noted that the points of conflict or messiness between the two have provided much of the creative drama of American history? Would we trust a society that finally made up its mind between the two and left the other wholly behind—if it could?

To the question Is Sydney Ahlstrom or Sidney Mead correct? I would answer "Yes." Mead remains the most influential teacher I have known. For all my criticism I have gone on public record with enthusiasm by writing the jacket blurbs for *both* his books, and will be ready to do so for volume three. It is all part of a long-term dialogue based on our career-long and his lifelong fads. No doubt we will all have much to talk about whenever our jets and his automobile meet somewhere along the way of the immense journey.