David W Fletcher, Spring 2003
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ROGER FINKE & RODNEY STARKE'S *THE CHURCHING OF AMERICA 1776-1990* & THOMAS TWEED'S *RETELLING U.S. RELIGIOUS HISTORY*

Today's historians and sociologists of American religion seem to believe a new discovery about America's past religious development is at hand. They boldly proclaim a new revelation that promises to topple the dogmas or "received wisdom" about America's sacred traditions. In a bit of self-congratulation, Roger Finke and Rodney Starke assert, "We did not intend to make major revisions in the history of American religion. But . . . we have done precisely that."[1] Another seer of the revisionist sect, Thomas Tweed, states, "The old 'grand narrative' of consensus and progress in American history . . . no longer makes sense of the national past." According to Tweed, the grand narratives of the country's religion fail to convince, since "textbook narratives that attempt to tell 'the whole story' of U.S. religious history have focused disproportionately on male, northeastern, Anglo-Saxon, mainline Protestants and their beliefs, institutions, and power."[2] True, the story about America's spiritual roots involves a complex and often bewildering melange. To deny such would be to deny a significant part of America's history. And, the story has been written predominately from a certain ecclesiastical perspective. But the fuller story is preserved richly in the heritage of the nation's denominations, its ethnic

[1] *The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1992), 1.

[2] *Retelling U.S. Religious History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

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cultures, and in the lives of individual adherents to its sacred mysteries. Much remains untapped, and a lot still can be done to illuminate the vast variety of the American religious experience.

This diverse story is not new and has not gone unrecognized. In the 1960s, Leander Keck observed, "Not only do we find ourselves outside the snug shelter of Christendom, of a culture which supported the church by its ideals and institutions, but we face a variety of non-Christian cultures in a way that has not been true for centuries. These include, among others, a strenuous Islam, a rejuvenated Buddhism, a militant Marxism, and an aggressive secularism."[3] In the 1970s, Sidney Ahlstrom remarked that "the United States–its nature and its actions–presents one of the world's most difficult challenges to the understanding, and a comprehensive account of its religious history holds promise of bringing light where light is sorely needed. . . . A broader stance, a wider conception of the 'rule of charity,' is essential, and this sympathy must be extended far beyond the explicitly Judaeo-Christian traditions."[4] Both Keck, Ahlstrom, and others acknowledged the multiplex nature of the American religious story,

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[3] *Mandate to Witness: Studies in the Book of Acts* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1964), 83.

[4] *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), xiv. Ahlstrom notes that synthesis of "all the country's varied religious movements can be accomplished if four important conditions are met: (1) religious history as a field of study must be placed not only spatially but theoretically within the larger frame of world history; (2) the concept of religion must be extended to include 'secular' movements and convictions, some of which opposed or sought to supplant the churches; (3) constant attention must be given to the radical diversity of American religious movements; and (4) the social context–including its demographic, economic, political, and psychological dimensions–must ever be borne in mind." Ahlstrom does an admirable job with such a herculean task.

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and this occurred well over four decades ago. So what do new prophets like Finke, Stark, and Tweed have to offer by way of new light on the country's religious upbringing?

As gurus of quantitative method and sociological theory, Finke and Stark (F&S) wish to debunk the myth of a decline in adherence to traditional Christianity based on processes of modernization and secularization. To the contrary, they argue, "The churching of America was accomplished by aggressive churches committed to vivid otherworldliness."[5] Armed with their free market model of "relentless competition," F&S count the cost to the losers, or the mainline churches, in America's religious economy to the benefit of the winners, or F&S's sects, whose pews have been filled by virtue of satisfying a much needed demand (i.e., otherworldliness). F&S have advocated an interesting macro interpretation of the data that must be given some thought. But the authors on closer examination have collected a hodgepodge of statistics with little or no connecting links except their overarching sociological models. The interpretation, therefore, rests on a questionable deductive method. Further, to a large extent, F&S's theory about growth, or increase of some versus decrease of others, or growth of one kind but not of another kind, really does not matter. How we got to today from the beginning is not so important. What matters for historical discourse is what the country looked like at any given point in time. The correct interpretation consequently will be one of flux–a ceaseless dynamic that has swells and ebbs, upswings and downturns. F&S's reverse process, just like its antithesis,

[5] Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 1.

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fails to capture the nation's unpredictable rhythms. As a result, F&S's work does not persuade on a variety of points.

First, what we have today–America's religious matrix–is what we have. How the country got to where it is does not change the current situation. For whatever reason, some historians and sociologists want the past to look like the present. But what the past looks like in light of today's situation is not necessarily a convincing story about the past. Second, no matter how much F&S want to believe it, religion is not an economy nor do mechanisms of religious attachment, motivation, persuasion, and transmission operate according to strict principles of economic theory. Some applicability may be possible (i.e., religion has an economy), but numerous differences render wholesale analogy implausible. Third, to argue against secularization based solely on a headcount appears quite bizarre. The "thing" that people leave and the "thing" that people join must be examined and clarified, and this needs to be done in considerable detail. Religiously, even peculiar tenets of faith or creeds and dogmas cannot illustrate the entire story. Ahlstrom surely has it right on this matter by looking at the fullest picture possible. Just as surely, F&S have made numerous assumptions about modernity or the lack thereof. In doing so, they have omitted considerable evidence that, more often than not, is of a nature that hardly can be quantified.

To their credit, though, F&S do give historians and sociologists a unique way of looking at the big picture of religious development in the nation. Their argument goes beyond elusive questions of rate versus quantity in order to engage some grander theme–whether or not there

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exists a valid historical account of progress toward liberalism.[6] But have they proven their point? It is not clear, unless only Southern Baptists, Holiness / Pentecostal groups, and independent Christian movements represent their conservative sects, while United Methodists, post-Vatican II Roman Catholics, and religious bodies affiliated with the National Council of Churches (NCC) represent their liberal churches. The point about a "march toward liberalism" conceivably could still be made given the reverse look at growth and decline from F&S's data. What matters most in the juxtaposition of "conservative" and "liberal" in United States religious life and thought is how these classifications are defined, and that depends a great deal on perspective.[7]

In contrast to F&S's macro view is the micro analysis adopted by contributors to Tweed's *Retelling U.S. Religious History* (*Rusrehi)*.[8] Tweed's collection by professors of history, religion, and sociology highlights the important twentieth-century shift in who augurs or divines the religious history of America. One thing is certain. No longer is religious history in America exclusively a creedal vocation. American religious history has been taken out of the hands of the clerics and handed over to the "secular" prophets at state universities. This, in some measure,

[6] F&S define "liberalism" as the refining of religious ideas "when they are shorn of mystery, miracle, and mysticism–when an active supernatural realm is replaced by abstractions concerning virtue." Ibid., 5. But this may be a "loaded" definition, since it reflects a consensus conceived and nurtured on American soil.

[7] Interestingly, F&S use a basic chronological approach in *The Churching of America*, which ends with what they would call liberal religion–ecumenism, the work of the NCC, and "mainline" denominations. This tends to disprove instead of substantiate their thesis.

[8] Did the extreme diversity of the book preclude a subtitle?

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explains the change in perspective from ecclesiastically-centered history to a history that decidedly is focused on other things (but not necessarily the same as F&S's "otherworldly" things).

In Tweed's collection, there are as many (and more) perspectives as there are authors. As a result, *Rusrehi* explores possibilities for constructing grand overviews of American religion from nontraditional viewpoints rather than the usual themes like church, creed, or cleric. So the reader is led to see the broad expanse of the American religious landscape through the eyes of women, Asians, Canadians, or Indians. Topics such as sex, ritual sites, contact, and geographical setting guide along these experimental narratives. What results is a rich kaleidoscope–an eclectic assortment of ways to envision the country's religious past. The results are at times curious like Ann Braude's "Women's History *Is* American Religious History." But is this because no one has thought about it quite like this? Often, the reconstructions seem contrived and even artificial, for instance, Tamar Frankiel's four chronological periods of ritualization. Some authors offer little that is different from traditional methods, for example, Joel Martin's treatment of the Indians according to contact and colonialism.[9] Even a cursory reading of *Rusrehi* seems to indicate that religion in America is ubiquitous.

But the real point of *Rusrehi* is its intent to explode the myth that United States religious history must be, or is best, told from a centrist or majority viewpoint. Tweed and his congregants want to illuminate the edges or the fringes. In doing so, they seek to capture the spirit of the

[9] *Rusrehi*, 61, 87, 149.

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dispossessed and the disadvantaged, the victimized and the downtrodden, as Tweed suggests, "to give voice to the voiceless."[10] This is social history at its best, at least in its design. But the view from the periphery has its limitations.

First, the phrase "American religious history" implies certain political, cultural, and even methodological suppositions about the collective nature of its elucidation. This is a problem area for interpreters, so much so that it would be quite presumptuous to be dogmatic. A collective synthesis seems appropriate, and it appears difficult to deviate from the wisdom of a basic centrist approach to a general narrative of the nation's sacred past. Second, the less variegated past cannot be redefined by the more variegated present. The perspectives of the present should not be superimposed on the past. For example, Braude is wrong when she says the term "feminization" reflects a nonexistent religious landscape.[11] To the contrary, a male-dominated religious landscape, infused with various levels of feminine involvement over time, did exist, still exists, and probably will continue to exist. Historians have described the process accurately, whether they use the term "feminization" or some other word or phrase. Laurie Maffly-Kipp also is wrong to ascribe centrist status to marginal dwellers of the Pacific Rim.[12] The indigenous Hawaiians and other groups do have a *distinctive* history. But not all can be *exceptional* which would be a logical contradiction. Third, historians, as well as sociologists, should avoid the

[10] Ibid., 3.

[11] Ibid., 94.

[12] Ibid., 148.

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temptation to foist their own conceptions of the present on occurrences in the past. What has been done has been done. It cannot be changed, and it should not be made to look like today's situation. But it can be identified, examined, and interpreted with care in order to preserve, as much as possible, the original milieu's nuances and meanings.

The contributors to *Rusrehi* definitely add nothing new to the idea that a great amount of variety exists in America's religious heritage. But they do give a novel twist to the story by more than tweaking the "old" centrist narratives. Radical and peripheral "new" narratives, though, can only result in fragmentation and, eventually, disintegration, unless a different "centrist" perspective guides the whole. If the latter occurs, then Tweed & Co. will be just as guilty of propagating a type of myth that they are so anxious to debunk. Believers in *Rusrehi* would do well to accept the historic fact of a "disproportionate public influence" in America's religious affairs.[13] That perspective is proven and still provides historians and sociologists a solid framework for an overview of America's sacred past. Nevertheless, concerning the valid question–whose religious history in America is the most important?–the answer may depend on who is asking and who is giving the answer. And the answer may very well unmask the responder's perspective.

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[13] Ibid., 13.