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KNOCKING ON HEAVEN'S DOOR

A review of Mark Oppenheimer, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. 293 pp. \$30 (cloth). ISBN: 0-300-10024-8.

IT IS CUSTOMARY to associate the American religious experience of the 1960s with a movement away from traditional expressions of spirituality and a movement towards the more exotic. Such organizations and trends as the Hare Krishna, Transcendental Meditation, and experimentation with psychedelics are assumed to represent "Nixon-era religion." Mark Oppenheimer's study provides not only a compliment to research on those more colorful activities but a correction. The great majority of Americans were not hippies or cult members, active proponents of gay rights or feminism, or engaged in drug use or social protest, and even though membership numbers in more traditional religious organizations declined in post-War America, mainline religion was an important part of the social and religious fabric that needs serious, historical treatment (26; on the rationale for focusing on mainstream religion, see further, 11-14).

The unique approach to church history modeled in this book can be highlighted by setting it side-by-side with another recent study of American religiosity during this period of dramatic cultural change. Don Lattin's *Following Our Bliss: How the Spiritual Ideals of the Sixties Shape Our Lives Today* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003) defines the 1960s as the period spanning from January 20, 1961, the date of John F. Kennedy's inaugural address, through to November 18, 1978 and the mass suicide of members of the Peoples Temple. These very appropriate boundaries represent both "the idealism, religious activism, and social commitment that defined the best of the Sixties" and a tragedy that saw "the spiritual and political dreams of the Sixties [collapse] in a collective nightmare" (Lattin 3). Like Oppenheimer's book, Lattin's analysis regularly describes large trends by telling the stories of first-hand witnesses and participants of the events described.

Through these stories, excerpts from interviews, and first-hand experiences Lattin manages to picture a vast array of religious themes: shifts in Roman Catholicism (29-44), the arrival of Eastern spirituality to North America (63-110), and Rock 'n' Roll as "another vehicle for spiritual transcendence" (114; see also 173-83) among them, and the emergence of such religious leaders as the Reverend Sun Myung Moon (189-204) and Jim Jones (95-97).

By contrast Mark Oppenheimer's *Knocking on Heaven's Door* concentrates on the experience of more traditional religious communities during this period and his apologetic for this emphasis is compelling. Cults and sects, he notes, are often "brief flashes" that may not survive long term. They do not provide an opportunity to study the interplay of religion and culture. However, "Looking at Nixon-era religion not through cults and sects, but rather through the counterculture's manifestations in mainline denominations, should point the way toward a new kind of church history: one that understands how the counterculture functioned not on the fringes of society—on communes and around gurus—but in the traditional denominations that must interact with America, or die" (7). *Knocking on Heaven's Door* models this new kind of church history.

Oppenheimer focuses on five religious groups: Unitarians, Southern Baptists, Jews, Roman Catholics, and Episcopalians. These groups are asked to "stand in for 'American religion' as a whole" (18) as it engaged the counterculture. These representative religious organizations "remained vital loci of argument, attuned to the changes going on across the land" (26). They were not immune to trends in American counterculture, as various concerns and questions it raised were carried into their churches and synagogues by their own members. Five illustrations of how mainline religion experienced and was required to respond to the counterculture of the 1960s are given.

In the opening chapter Oppenheimer examines the gay rights movement among Unitarians, a story that began in 1969 with the "coming out" of the Rev. James Stoll, "the first minister of any American religious denomination, and probably in the world, to publicly admit his homosexuality" (30). Post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism encountered the counterculture in a rather different form. In chapter two Oppenheimer describes a wave of aestheticism that swept into Catholic masses influenced by folk culture. Catholic folk musicians like Joe Wise, Sr. Miriam Therese Winter, and Ed Gutfreund wrote songs that reflected the "lay spirit of Vatican II" and spoke of a God who was "kinder and gentler, more a benevolent father than a judgmental overlord" (80). There was a new freedom within the church, an openness to move away from the conservative patterns of worship that were—in the opinion of many—out of step with modern society.

For American Jews of the late 1960s there was an increasing dissatisfaction with structure and institutionalism. One expression of this was the formation of “unaffiliated havurot”—study groups, coffee shops, communal living houses, and so on—that were not within synagogues but against them (97). For Episcopalians, feminism demanded attention to systemic problems within its churches, particularly touching on the ordination of women. Leading the fight for the inclusion of women among the priesthood were notables like Jeannette Piccard, Suzanne Hiatt, and (Isabelle) Carter Heyward and their struggle eventually resulted in the first ordination of a woman according to revised canon law in January 1977. Finally, Oppenheimer tells the story of anti-Vietnam sentiments among members of the Southern Baptist Convention. Young activists like Terry Nichols raised voices of dissent that stood in sharp contrast to the sentiments of many Southern Baptists who generally “described American military engagement in Vietnam with sympathy and charity” (204). Though dramatically different from one another, common elements can still be observed in these stories, such as the indebtedness each movement shared with the African-American struggle (213).

These selected examples of the influence of the counterculture on mainstream religion are well-chosen; Oppenheimer succeeds in illustrating the extent to which established communities were compelled to confront social change. This is an aspect of social and religious history easily overlooked, and for this reason *Knocking on Heaven's Door* makes a meaningful contribution to American cultural studies.

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