

Book Reviews

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Recommended Citation

Burnidge, Cara L.; Brasich, Adam; Johnson, Zac; Blythe, Christopher; and Stoddard, Brad "Book Reviews." *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies* 4, no. 1 (2012).

<http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/imwjournal/vol4/iss1/7>

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Book Reviews

BERMAN, LILA CORWIN. *Speaking of Jews: Rabbis, Intellectuals, and the Creation of an American Public Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 280 pp. ISBN 9780520256811.

In her first book Lila Corwin Berman, Murray Friedman Professor and Director of Feinstein Center for American Jewish History at Temple University, explores Jewish self-identity between World War I and the Civil Rights Era. Writing to both a scholarly and general audience, Berman seeks to explore how Jews explained themselves to non-Jews between 1920 and 1960 and “how the meaning of Jewishness became inseparable from their explanations” (2).

Rather than focus on “everyday” Jews “on the ground,” *Speaking of Jews* analyzes Jewish intellectuals’ public discourse about Jewishness and American identity. After World War I, Berman argues, American Jewish intellectuals purposefully began to explain Judaism and the place of Jews in American public life to non-Jews. They did so by cleaving to the emergent field of sociology, creating a vocabulary of “Jewishness” that did not rely on biology or race. In the process, Berman asserts, American Jewish intellectuals refashioned Jewish identity for other Jews. By the Civil Rights Era, Jewish intellectuals had successfully placed Jews at the center of American public life and popular understandings of American democracy. Jewish self-identity had successfully changed over time; yet Jewish intellectuals managed to continually explain “Jewishness” as the epitome of American identity. Thus, Berman concludes, “the Jewish story was a metonym

for the American story” (10).

According to Berman, the larger purpose of *Speaking of Jews* is to contribute to “a larger historical and political discussion about how people, communities, and nations have encountered the tension between humanism or universalism on the one hand, and particularism or distinctiveness on the other” (7). With American Jews as her example, Berman offers a glimpse at a group of people who “were forced to be self-conscious of their differences” yet they were “given the freedom to eradicate many of those things that made them different” (7). It is important to keep in mind that Berman’s subjects are primarily elite Jewish (Reform) intellectuals who despite their insularity and small numbers, Berman argues, are responsible for crafting the nation’s understanding of Jewish identity and status in American public life. Accordingly *Speaking of Jews* contains the markers of an intellectual history, with a source base of magazines, newspapers, transcripts, speeches, and other printed material written or articulated by elite, male Jews. To balance the narrative, Berman also includes material on select popular subjects like Marilyn Monroe and experiences of other Jewish women garnered from sociological research.

Together these sources reveal that the emerging field of sociology and Jewish intellectuals mutually benefited from a vocabulary that encouraged the preservation of community (often through endogamy) yet avoided biological or racial claims to Jewish identity. Jewish intellectuals crafted a message to non-Jews that was heard primarily by other Jews: Jews are part of a unique tradition that has much to offer American democracy. In fact, these intellectuals claimed, Jews epitomized American liberalism with their commitment to individual liberty (especially volition) and group identity. Liberal Judaism reflected American liberalism—both, for example, made claims to universal good while defining themselves according to the exclusion of others (17). Consequently, Jews supported American liberal individualism while they also retained their unique outsider status. By the Cold War, Berman asserts that Jews were essential to refashioning American democratic ideals to support unity through religious and cultural diversity. America thrived because minorities like Jews could thrive in America.

Implicitly, Berman seems to suggest that America is an exceptional place that affords Jews the liberty to construct their identity in whatever manner they chose rather than Jews being particularly exceptional for applying their own volition in this manner. This seems to hold true as the tensions within liberalism—of maintaining individual choice while also asserting group cohesiveness—intensified in the Civil Rights era when Jews increasingly married non-Jews, eroding Jewish sociological cogency according to the very tenets rabbis purported.

Berman does an excellent job of connecting shifts in American Judaism to larger trends in American history. American Jews are fully a part of political discourse—and perhaps directing it—between World War I and the Civil Rights Movement (rather than an addendum to “mainstream” America). Unlike John Sarna or Leonard Dinnerstein, Berman does not draw attention to antisemitism as a major contributing factor to individual American Jewish identity or the American Jewry as a community. Instead, Berman asserts that Jews not only contributed to and but also *developed* American liberalism in the twentieth century. Berman makes an excellent case for Jews (rather than middle-class white Protestants) benefitting from Cold War rhetoric of “faith in faith.”

At the same time, Berman is careful to also demonstrate how these shifts in popular political discourse can be less than helpful to religious groups. Berman, like her subjects, relocates “religion” to the realm of group identity. In this telling, religion is not what you believe or what you do; it is *who you are*. That individual focus of identity, however, is shaped by the articulation of group identity. As a result, Berman provides an interesting contrast to Ann Taves’ work in *Fits, Trances, and Visions*. Whereas Taves delineated individual religious experience from explanations of religious experience, Berman demonstrates how religious identity and explanations of religious identity are woven together and, perhaps, cannot be separated. Consequently, *Speaking of Jews* supplies fruitful points of discussion for those interested in Jewish Studies and American Religious History in particular as well as Religious Studies more generally.

CARA L. BURNIDGE, *Florida State University*

FINSTUEN, ANDREW S. *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 255 pp. ISBN 9780807833360.

In welcome and original scholarship, Andrew Finstuen has reverted historians' gazes towards theology. Analyzing the unlikely trinity of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich, Finstuen demonstrates the existence of a "theological revival" occurring in America during the post-World War II era. While many histories and analyses of American religion in this time period focus on the "captive revival," in which Protestantism is beholden to a middle-class, suburbanite ethos (Norman Vincent Peale's theology of "positive thinking" is the quintessential case study of this), Finstuen focuses on the popularity and accessibility of countercultural theology amongst Christian theologians and their lay readers while utilizing the doctrine of original sin as a window into this second revival.

In establishing the existence of this revival, Finstuen analyzes the thoughts of Niebuhr, Graham, and Tillich on the nature of sin. While Niebuhr is often envisioned as the neo-orthodox prophet, Graham as the common man's evangelist, and Tillich as the vanguard of correlative theology, and hence they represent three disparate tracks of American Protestantism, Finstuen successfully connects the three through their largely critical views of humankind and society. Niebuhr, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, dismissed the liberal Protestant notion of societal progress and perfection, furthering his critique of human sin in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Graham, informed by his Reformed evangelical heritage, naturally saw Christ as the only escape from a life and existence plunged in sin. Similarly, Tillich discussed human "estrangement" from God as the root cause of humankind's existential crisis, relabeling traditional doctrines with new, arguably relevant terminologies while attempting to preserve the core of the doctrine. In Finstuen's analysis, Tillich's radicalness is correctly balanced with an acknowledgment of a conservative influence, providing a fresh interpretation of the often misunderstood theologian. Together, these theologians served to balance to Norman Vincent Peale and the "captive revival," advocat-

ing an alternative theological perspective which was consumed by lay readers, whom Finstuen labels “lay theologians.” Finstuen’s analysis is made more persuasive by his inclusion of Billy Graham, whose popularity and surprising theological similarities with Niebuhr and Tillich grant further credence to the existence of a “theological revival.”

Central to this book’s contribution is Finstuen’s theoretical usage of the “lay theologian,” who appears as the fourth major character under investigation. In order to demonstrate the relevance of Niebuhr, Graham, and Tillich beyond the academy, Finstuen utilizes correspondence from readers to the theologians, demonstrating serious interaction with theology by lay members. In effect, Finstuen successfully counters the scholarly relegation of theology as a matter of the elites. Instead, we find a housewife writing detailed letters to Paul Tillich, thanking him for providing her with a theological voice. Another woman, independently studying Tillich’s *The Courage to Be*, developed a 49 page commentary of notes and comments. Finstuen provides countless examples of literary exchanges between “lay theologians” and Niebuhr, and likewise mines the resources of Graham’s “My Answer” column for many accounts of lay Protestant interactions with these preeminent theologians. Finstuen’s assembled evidence does not only substantiate the existence of the “theological revival,” but it also provides a promising theoretical framework for historians of American religion seeking to properly account for theology within the historical narrative. Theology, alongside class, race, regional identity, and other factors, should be taken seriously, as perhaps lay church members are more theologically engaged with academic theology than previously thought. The non-elites maintain agency as they freely interact with the texts, sometimes vehemently disagreeing with them, but thoroughly interacting with them nonetheless out of their own volition. As Finstuen demonstrates, lay people are theological creatures too..

ADAM BRASICH, *Florida State University*

HUANG, C. JULIA. *Charisma and Compassion: Cheng Yen and the Buddhist Tzu Chi Movement*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009. 382 pp. ISBN 9780674031333.

C. Julia Huang's study of the Taiwanese Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Merit Society uses the story of Venerable Cheng Yen and her followers to explore the role of charisma and globalization in the development of contemporary religious movements. While the work is guided by the narrative of Tzu Chi's development, the focus clearly lies in more general theoretical and methodological questions of the role of charisma in the development and institutionalization of religious movements. Huang's work is aimed at developing "a new ethnographic approach," which, in its consideration of charisma, "allows emotion into the theory of practice, and enables nonverbal corporeality to be taken seriously as cultural construction and symbolic interpretation" (5).

The work can be viewed in two parts. The first four chapters deal with Tzu Chi's origin, institutional organization, and practices. Chapter one introduces Ven. Cheng Yen, discussing the ways in which hagiographic accounts of the founder's life enable followers to rationalize and routinize the charisma of the founder. Chapters two and three discuss this "routinization of charisma" further, arguing that the organization's structure establishes Ven. Cheng Yen as the sole source of clear hierarchical authority, whose charismatic authority is reinforced both in the leader's monthly tour of Taiwan, and by "homecoming" visits to the Tzu Chi headquarters made by devotees. Chapter four discusses two primary practices seen among Tzu Chi members—crying/weeping and "hand-language song"—that reflect "opposite ends of a continuum of emotions between ecstasy and formalization," both equally important in the routinization of charisma.

Huang provides in these chapters a clear portrait of both the function and structure of Tzu Chi's organization, as well as the form and context of practices undertaken by the group. Especially clear is Huang's discussion of the various contexts in which crying can be witnessed among Tzu Chi members, and the gendered "performances" reflected in the act of crying in the context of both

Taiwanese culture generally and Tzu Chi specifically. This section is, however, lacking a clear theoretical framework, especially in regards to her focus on “charisma.” While Huang engages briefly in the introduction with several theories of charisma (including the work of Max Weber and Thomas Csordas), the term is not employed with the same level of critical analysis throughout the work. More often, charisma is described in vague and generally unhelpful terms such as “appeal” or “magnetism.”

The second half of the book outlines the rapid growth of the movement experienced in the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as its evolution into an international NGO, discussed in terms of the development of local and global “personhood.” Huang highlights how Tzu Chi’s close relationships with both the Kuomintang and the Democratic Progressive Party have allowed the organization to flourish, but does not discuss how attempts of the government to “recapture Tzu Chi by collaborating with, if not riding on the coattails of” the organization has affected Tzu Chi policies or practices (209).

Huang seems to overemphasize the “globalized” and “transcultural” nature of the organization. Although Tzu Chi has surely become “global” insofar as its influence has spread throughout the worldwide Taiwanese diaspora, “localized” or “indigenous” forms of Tzu Chi appear to have only developed in Malacca, Malaysia, and then only in a limited fashion. Huang does not question why Tzu Chi has had such little impact on or appeal outside Taiwanese and Chinese communities, despite having centers in Tokyo, New York and Boston. While she is quick to point out that Tzu Chi provides English subtitles for videos of sermons and performs sign language singing in English, she does not address the fact that such forms of outreach have had little effect.

While this volume may be useful to students and scholars interested in contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism in its vivid description of Tzu Chi’s organization and practice, it does not provide a useful theoretical model for scholars interested in global Buddhism.

ZAC JOHNSON, *Florida State University*

JOHNSON, MELVIN C. *Polygamy on the Pedernales: Lyman Wight's Mormon Villages in Antebellum Texas, 1845 to 1858*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006. 231 pp. ISBN 0874216273.

Since the Church of Christ, later known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was founded in 1830, there have been hundreds of divergent Mormon communities. For the most part, mainstream scholars publishing in university presses have neglected to probe the intricacies of other Mormonisms beyond the LDS Church, the RLDS Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Strang), and very recently, Mormon Fundamentalist branches. *Polygamy on the Pedernales* is only the second time that a university press has published a treatment of Lyman Wight who in 1845 established the first Mormon colony in the Republic of Texas. For that reason alone, this is an important volume.

In 1844, a heated succession crisis followed the death of Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church. Numerous claimants emerged to continue or to correct Smith's vision of primitive Christianity. Most adherents to Mormonism sided with the succession claims of the twelve apostles with Brigham Young at their head. Under Young, the esoteric theology and ceremonial practices introduced to only a very few during Joseph Smith's lifetime were institutionalized. Of course, this included the controversial early Mormon practice of polygamy. A number of dissenting bodies formed to rival Young's interpretation of Mormonism. What makes Lyman Wight such an interesting figure is that he was one of the twelve apostles, sided with Young's idea of Joseph Smith, theology, and polygamy, yet questioned Young's policies relating to colonization and the restructuring of ecclesiastical leadership.

Immediately after Smith's death, Lyman Wight relocated with a group of two hundred Mormons first to Wisconsin and then to Texas, in order to fulfill an assignment he had received from Joseph Smith to establish a colony in the area. Once in Texas, Wight and Young had a falling out based around public statements disparaging the other's actions and new developments occurring in the other's absence. Within a few years, the die had been cast and Wight's excommunication resulted in closed doors between the two communities.

Michael Scott Van Wagenen's *The Texas Republic and the Mormon Kingdom of God* provided a fair overview of the colonization efforts undertaken by Lyman Wight as part of a larger project of contextualizing early Mormonism's flirtation with nationalism and subsequent interest in Texas. *Polygamy on the Pedernales* was also preceded by Jeremy Benton Wight's self-published *Lyman Wight: The Wild Ram of the Mountains* which provided the first full biographical work of Lyman Wight for a sympathetic Mormon audience. That being said, *Polygamy on the Pedernales* is the first published full-scale treatment of Lyman Wight's community by a professional historian.

As can be expected, Johnson has brought a number of strengths to the table. First, his acute probing of the primary sources has resulted in a number of fresh and exciting insights. This is particularly apparent in his discussion of the role of plural marriage in the community and the subsequent history of Wight's descendants. Concerning polygamy, Johnson describes how the practice strengthened ties between members of the community. He also ably demonstrates the secretive nature of polygamy in the community – something not always apparent in the source material – through discovering that the colony attempted to hide polygamous relationships in the 1850 census.

Johnson corrects the mistaken idea that an equal portion of Wight's descendants ended up as members of the polygamy-supporting LDS Church as did in the polygamy-rejecting Reorganized Church. Instead, he discovered that, following the death of Lyman Wight and the collapse of his community, the "majority, including the wives of Lyman Wight and most of the other polygamists and former polygamists, joined the RLDS church in the Upper Midwest" (197). Those that joined the RLDS Church attempted to re-write the community's history denying the existence or prevalence of plural marriage in the community. Specifically, Johnson suggests that a number of documents preserved by Wight's descendants and later donated to the RLDS archives have turned up missing, while those sympathetic to this policy were in charge.

As can be expected with any such work, there are weaknesses. First, I should

note that I have stumbled upon a few factual errors in the work, albeit largely minor ones. On page 42, Johnson quotes a letter from Lyman Wight to Brigham Young, the cite checker unfortunately missed at least one line of text from the quotation and as a result the quote is both inaccurate and misleading in regards to Wight's relationship with the larger movement. More importantly, I think the text would have benefited from a more thorough positioning in Mormonism's esoteric Nauvoo history. Thus, I would recommend this work be read alongside D. Michael Quinn's still excellent *Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*.

I worried about the title of this work, since it seemed to me that someone was trying to employ a marketing strategy of linking Lyman Wight's brand of polygamy in antebellum Texas with the recent relocation of Warren Jeffs' Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to El Dorado, Texas. Whereas, Johnson's urge to draw parallels are limited to his introduction and conclusion, I tend to think it is not overly gratuitous. He does, from his vantage point in 2006, make eerie predictions of a confrontation between Jeffs' community and "Lone Star law and customs." Johnson astutely identifies the now missing component that allowed for Wight's survival in the antebellum and the impending crisis at El Dorado: the frontier, which the FLDS simply don't have to their advantage.

Despite its flaws, *Polygamy on the Pedernales* is an important work in the history of Mormonism. I would recommend the volume to scholars and students of religion in the American West, as well as Mormon Studies proper. My hope is that this volume will inspire further academic endeavors on Wight's community and other sectarian forms of Mormonism that have multiplied over the past 150 years.

CHRISTOPHER BLYTHE, *Florida State University*

MCNALLY, MICHAEL D. *Honoring Elders: Aging, Authority, and Ojibwe Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 382 pp. ISBN 9780231145022.

In *Honoring Elders*, Michael D. McNally produces an ethnographical study and history of age and eldership in the Ojibwe people, a Native American group indigenous to the upper Great Lakes region in North America. McNally's goal is two-fold. First, he wants to identify the religious nature of eldership, and second, he argues that age should be elevated as a category of academic analysis on a level with ethnicity or gender. Drawing from diverse sources such as missionary journals, travel narratives, transcribed oral narratives, and ethnographic fieldwork, McNally highlights the significance and authority of old age in Native American Ojibwe tradition. Eldership, McNally argues, is a constant, yet evolving, source of religious, spiritual, and political authority. This evolution is rooted in historical developments that are characterized by overlapping patterns of interaction with European settlers, including periods of trade, treaty negotiation, warfare, coerced assimilation, and Christian missionizing. McNally is particularly interested in the period after the 1970s, when political decisions by the United States government resulted in new possibilities for tribal cultural self-determination, allowing the Ojibwe to reclaim and reconstruct their history and culture through the lens of modern sensibilities. This resulted in a reformulation of the authority of the elders, who assumed new roles in the communities as sources of wisdom and knowledge in the Ojibwe's ongoing search for sacred learning, spiritual maturity, morality, and communal vitality. McNally concludes that eldership is a persistent source of power, but one whose authority and significance is subject to change relative to larger socio-historical factors.

In his attempt to elevate age as a category of scholarly analysis, McNally draws from an existing anthropology and historical study of age. He is in conversation with various historians, but the work of cultural historian Thomas Cole is particularly important. Cole traced the de-meaning of age in American cultural history where old age became a "problem" best addressed by science.

McNally embraces Cole's emphasis on age and its relationship to historical trends and then applies it to the Ojibwe. Sociologically, McNally draws from a range of classic and current sociologists, beginning with Max Weber's insights on authority. Weber marked a turn from an objective approach to authority in favor of a theory of authority as situationally constituted in social life. McNally synthesizes Cole and Weber as he traces the authority of eldership and its evolution as embedded in larger, competing discourses.

Honoring Elders is a well-written and fascinating work that insightfully recognizes eldership as a position of authority that is both socially constructed and evolving, subject to internal and external impulses. However, McNally's romanticized view of eldership leads him to develop a potentially contradictory theory of eldership in his contention that it is both evolving and timeless. Furthermore, McNally's assertion that elders are religious authorities equal to shamans and priests is also problematic, as it assumes a *sui generis* religious space that is questioned by both the academy and apparently the Ojibwe as well (see p. 48).

BRAD STODDARD, *Florida State University*