

Notes on the Margin

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Religious Movements in Contemporary America. Edited by Irving I. Zaretsky and Mark P. Leone. Princeton, New Jersey; Princeton University Press, 1974, 837 pp., \$25.00.

Religious Movements in Contemporary America is a collection of 27 papers, mainly based on field work, on "marginal religious movements in the United States"—such as Jehovah's Witnesses, the Pentecostals, Spiritualists, Satanists, Hare Krishna, Scientology, and the Mormons. The Introduction lists 26 characteristics of this class of "modern" religious systems, extending J. S. Judah's 1967 grouping, "the American metaphysical movement." The term "modern religion" follows the much-cited work of Robert Bellah, who believes a stage of "religious evolution" is upon us in which belief systems tend to be continually self-revising, for the synthesis of the beliefs is in the hands of individuals rather than of institutional churches.

These papers are by social scientists writing to each other. Most describe fairly extensively one religious system, then connect their data to some aspect of method or theory. Anybody seriously interested in social science study of religion ought to read this volume. The concept of "sect," for example, demands reconsideration in the light of the reports in this volume. Mormon social scientists in particular will benefit by reading Luther Gerlach's biting but fair characterization of conventional academic studies of religion.

The Mormons are extensively treated in three papers, as well as being referred to other places. Leo Pfeffer, a law professor, considers the Mormons as one case under "the legitimation of marginal religions," recapping the polygamy controversy in a way most Mormons will not have encountered.

Janet L. Dolgin, a former student of Leone's, in "Latter-day Sense and Substance," offers a number of stimulating and informative points amidst unfortunate errors and painful jargon (e.g., "the actualization of a direct and immediate communicative link between gods and men is the cardinal (and innovating) neologism of the Mormon Church . . ."). Among her contributions are a treatment of how varying uses of terms in the Mormon lexicon mask substantial differences in beliefs, her distinguishing several levels of ritual, a "structural" analysis of the (garbled) temple ceremonies which reveals a twofold, chiasmatic form, and some valuable observations on apparent authoritativeness in the LDS Church and the simultaneous underlying openness which qualifies Mormonism as "modern" in Bellah's terms.

Dolgin studied Mormon communities in Arizona in 1970, but she didn't learn enough detail. Her article is seriously handicapped by small errors and downright blunders, most of which could have been avoided had she simply asked assistance from some Mormons. She holds, for example, that "blood" is a central concept in the Mormon system. "The Mormon concept of blood entails the notion of a definitive substance which divides humanity into three groups: the blood of the House of Israel, the blood of the Gentile, and the blood of the Negro." Among the slight documentation on the third group is "Nephi 21:25," which she takes to refer to "the Negro" rather than Lamanites. She concludes that it is a sense of ("unisub-

stantial") blood connectedness which unites Mormons. The idea is simply not accurate. As a Mormon in the face of such avoidable misconstruals, I begin to appreciate the feelings of Vina Deloria, the Indian who gripes about the anthropologists who afflict his people.

The biggest paper in the book is by Mark Leone. (It would have been improved considerably, along with other papers, by much tighter editing; lengthy redundancies are common.) It is one of the most important scholarly statements on Mormonism to appear in years. It has weaknesses, but they are less serious than those in the work of O'Dea, for example, while the insights Leone offers are in many cases so valuable that I wish I had grasped them first. Historians may wish for fuller documentation on certain points, but it seems to me that we have had in studies of the Mormons to this time a surfeit of documentation without enough insights. I'm pleased with this turnabout.

The author's study of Mormons has been mostly on the Arizona communities on the Little Colorado River. He began while a student in archaeology at the University of Arizona, studying the historic ecology of that area for comparison with prehistoric times. By treating the entire set of communities rather than a single village he gained valuable perspective. Still, that area is obviously provincial and somewhat atypical. When he, and his reader, try to apply his insights to the larger Mormon community, and particularly abroad, the extension fails to come off successfully in all ways.

Leone's central aim is to understand how the material conditions of life in these communities relates to religious belief and action, and vice versa. His position is based in systems theory, not a simple-minded economic determinism. He demonstrates clearly that changes have occurred in the way Mormonism in Arizona villages has been interpreted and used to cope with a difficult natural and social environment, and that at the same time that environment exists for these people in the way it does because of the religion. In the nineteenth century, he claims, a particular set of circumstances prevailed within which the Church served the people by adapting them successfully in one way, while since about 1920 the Church has become a means for shaping "modern" man in Bellah's sense—flexible, prepared to change roles, non-dogmatic, self-revising. He details, for the Little Colorado in particular and Mormon country generally, some of the forces which have required this shift.

The title, "The Economic Basis for the Evolution of Mormon Religion," turns out not to be as offensive as the phrasing might make it appear. He himself says at one point that the term "adaptation" or even "progression" to Mormons, could have been used instead of the somewhat pretentious "evolution."

The author is sensitive and even sympathetic to the Mormons, not as a believer, but as an observer fascinated by what he sees as a remarkably successful social institution. In all his work and conversation he evinces genuine interest—even excitement—about "his" people. In this he is reminiscent of Thomas O'Dea, whose dissertation, done while he was yet fresh from his discovery of Mormons in Ramah, New Mexico, shows him deeply affected. Let us hope that over-analysis and arm-chair rethinking does not rob Leone's forthcoming book on the Mormons of that warm, sensitive feeling he now has (as O'Dea's tone shifted while dissertation became book, during his years at Fordham).

Whether this bulky volume is read as a research record or for its pictures of the Mormons, it has substantial value. Too bad it is priced outlandishly.