

## Nothing New under the Sun

*New Religions and the Theological Imagination in America* by Mary Farrell Bednarowski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), xiv, 175 pp., \$25.00.

Reviewed by Gary Topping, curator of manuscripts, Utah State Historical Society.

WHILE IT IS BEYOND the capability of any book to demonstrate the infinite capacity of human belief, there seems nevertheless to be little reason to doubt the existence of such infinitude, and Mary Farrell Bednarowski offers further evidence of it. Her slim volume offers comparative examinations of six homegrown American religions, three from the nineteenth century and three from the twentieth, all indicating that theological creativity is alive in this country and providing fresh ingredients for the stew of American intellectual life. These new ingredients, however, originate almost solely outside academia and established religious traditions, coming instead from among those unschooled in formal theology and philosophy.

Of course, inventing new religions is a favorite cottage industry in this country, and Bednarowski had plenty of examples from which to choose. No student of American religious history will be completely pleased with her selections, given the difficulty of slicing a valid cross section; one wonders, for example, at the omission of the Seventh-Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Bednarowski chose these six—Mormonism, the Unification Church, Christian Science, Scientology, Theosophy, and New Age—according to two criteria: each has an appreciable number of adherents, and each has produced a literature extensive enough to sustain serious analysis.

Objections to specific choices are also possible: the Unification Church, for example, originated in Korea, not America; and the phenomenon she calls "New Age" is hardly an organized religion at

all, but rather a barely related multitude of localized groups. To the first objection, Bednarowski points out that while the Reverend Sun Myung Moon did found the Unification Church in his native Korea, it has flourished primarily in America, and America enjoys a primary importance in its theology. To the second, she claims to find a common core of New Age thought in the works of Marilyn Ferguson and the Dominican Matthew Fox. (Perhaps it is worth noting at this point that since the publication of Bednarowski's book, the Vatican has put some distance between Roman Catholic theology and the New Age by suggesting that Fox refrain from publishing for a year while he reflects upon his relationship to the Catholic tradition.)

In organizing her comparison, Bednarowski groups her subjects into three pairs, each containing one religion from the nineteenth century and one from the twentieth: Mormonism and the Unification Church; Christian Science and Scientology; and Theosophy and New Age. She then compares the teachings of each pair on four fundamental theological questions: the nature of God, human nature, the nature of the afterlife, and morals and ethics. She often discovers almost as many differences as similarities within the pairs, which at times makes her groupings appear artificial. (There are, after all, no direct historical connections among the pairs.)

Still, pairing is an effective analytical device, for similarities do exist on some essential points. The most compelling of the similarities are between Mormonism and the Unification Church, who share important Christological and anthropological concepts and a belief in America as the primary theater of theological destiny. The weakest links are between Christian Science and Scientology: in spite of the word "science" in their names, neither exhibits a basis in any kind of discernible science or scientific method.