

## 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.

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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.

The weakest aspects of this book are its lack of critical analysis and its overall thesis. Bednarowski's accounts of each religion are descriptive rather than analytical; and to that extent, they succeed very well. She has read the scriptures and the basic literature of each religion and digested them thoroughly. Few readers will come to this book with an understanding of more than one of the religions discussed; the book is a fine reference tool for comparing the groups on the four fundamental theological categories it discusses. But Bednarowski, who operates from a liberal, ecumenical Protestant perspective, seems incapable of identifying an outworn, inconsistent, or untenable idea when it is handed to her. Such criticisms as she does broach are delivered as a slow-pitch softball. The apologists for each of the six religions have seen those pitches before, and they hit them out of the park.

One would like to think that progress in theology and philosophy is possible, but it can never occur unless we permanently lay aside dead ends and untenable propositions. Yet this book offers too much theological dead wood exhumed from the rubbish heaps of the early Christian era: pantheism (or at least a divine immanence perilously close to it), Gnosticism, Pelagianism, and other concepts once popular but eventually rejected for good reason. Too many of those old dogs, to change the metaphor, simply won't hunt anymore, yet they limp and creak across large expanses of this book, and Bednarowski can't seem to tell them from Lassie and Rin-Tin-Tin. And so one wonders, after turning the last page, why she thinks the American theological imagination is so vigorous, since there is so little here that is genuinely new, and even less that can be sustained by anything more than the infinite capacity of human belief.

## BRIEF NOTICES

*The Political Theory of Liberation Theology: Toward a Reconvergence of Social Values and Social Science* by John R. Pottenger (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), 264 pp., cloth, \$44.50; paper, \$16.50.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY emerged in Latin America during the late 1960s as a merger of Christian moral theology and radical, often Marxist, politics aimed at overturning the inequitably distributed wealth and oppressive governments in the Third World. Through the 1984 silencing of Leonardo Boff, a leading liberation theologian, and the recent closing of two seminaries advocating liberation theology in Brazil, the Catholic Church has repu-

diated the movement's excesses. Nevertheless, it remains a potent force within both Catholicism and Latin America.

Mormon thought has so far remained uninfluenced by liberation theology, but Mormon missionaries in Latin America have sometimes run afoul of the movement indirectly when they have been accused of being agents for imperialistic American policies and institutions. Thus, it would seem desirable for Mormons to become aware of the forces causing turbulence in that area of the world. Pottenger's book, though high in price and academic in tone, is one possible source of such information on the intellectual foundations of liberation theology, its history, and its leading advocates.