

Featured Review Essay

***The Spiritual Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War.* By Jonathan P. Herzog. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xi + 273 pp. \$34.95 Cloth**

***Faith and War: How Christians Debated the Cold and Vietnam Wars.* By David E. Settje. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011. xi + 233 pp. \$39.00 Cloth**

doi:10.1017/S1755048313000369

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History, like politics, is full of surprises. That so much happens that is unexpected, unanticipated, or unpredictable has been a major reason why histories have been written and polities have been formed. The natural sciences are different precisely in this respect. While they too are full of surprises, the natural sciences would account for surprises according to more regular laws, and thus transform what once was a surprise into a predictable regularity. But history and politics have been organized to leave the surprise a surprise. As Hayden White has written, “the historical world offered special problems, difficulties not presented in the human effort to comprehend the world of merely physical processes” (*Metahistory* 1973, 45).

Religion, however, might be a special case. For religion is designed to establish regularities. It is thus inherently a conservative activity, providing fixed laws or modes of action where otherwise there may be none. This, at least, is the dominant view of the social sciences, which have now invested over a century’s worth of energies making religion conform to the laws of sociology and psychology. In the 19th century especially social science began to transform what had been a source of profound historical unpredictability and political upheaval into a smoothly functioning component in the larger social system, an effort John Milbank has characterized as “policing the sublime” (*Theology and Social Theory* 1993).

Therefore, in coming across a history of religion, we are met with a particular challenge. The challenge is not quite that between “hermeneutical” and “positivistic” approaches. Rather, it is that between “history” and “religion.” *History* would tell us to come with an appetite for surprises. But *religion*, now indelibly a sociological category, would teach us to look for predictability. The contemporary practice of the history of religion is regularly faced with this challenge. At the very least, every historian of religion is met with a choice as whether look for surprises or to offer an account of some overriding regularities — that is, whether to direct historical inquiry into “religion” in a historical direction or in a sociological one.

The two books considered here, David E. Settje’s *Faith and War: How Christians Debated the Cold and Vietnam Wars* and Jonathan P. Herzog’s *The Spiritual Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War*, rather clearly represents the two different alternatives before historians of religion. Settje offers a history of *religion*, largely adopting a social-scientific mode of inquiry, whereas Herzog’s book is clearly written as a *history*. Therefore the two books, though addressing related and sometimes overlapping subject matter, are profoundly different works. I should say at the outset that I come to this issue not as a historian of religion, but rather as one who engages the history of religion regularly and has long been both fascinated and flummoxed by its peculiar challenges.

David Settje offers *Faith and War* as a means of “better understanding the 1960s and 1970s” by looking at the “influence American Christians had on foreign relations opinions.” This he pursues through an analysis of several different “entities” representing different strains of American Christianity in the period: the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* and its more mainline counterpart *Christian Century*; a number of Roman Catholic periodicals representing different Catholic perspectives; and speeches and statements offered by the Southern Baptist Convention, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Christ (2, 10). Settje tells us that along the way he will address questions like “Did the history of a particular religious institution factor into its position on war and diplomacy? How and to what extent did theology or spirituality guide this decision making? And what does this teach us about American Christianity specifically and the United States more generally during this pivotal decade?” (2). These questions, in fact, reveal much about the nature of Settje’s study.

The first — “Did the history of a particular religious institution factor into its position on war and diplomacy?” — is a “yes” or “no” question

which, in a historical mode, seems nonsensical. Only from a sociological approach would such a question seem worth asking. Indeed, it is the sort of question a social scientist would devise where “the history of a particular religious institution” and “its position on war and diplomacy” are independent and dependent variables, respectively.

The second question — “How and to what extent did theology or spirituality guide this decision making?” — invites a form of inquiry far different from causal testing. Here, one would need a sufficient mastery of the relevant theologies and spiritualities of the groups and institutions in question to trace their influence on decision making, a task that would seem to elude any objective measures and instead call for the more subtle use of interpretation and evidence.

The third question — “What does this teach us about American Christianity specifically and the United States more generally during this pivotal decade?” — stands awkwardly between “history” and “religion.” On the one hand, it suggests that we might learn something new (even surprising?) from the study (is this what Settje means by “teach us?”). On the other hand, the question points to a conception of historical inquiry as an offshoot of positive science, where the point of historiography is to “teach us” knowledge that heretofore we lacked, and thus fill in the gaps in the ongoing project of the construction of a full and complete record of the past.

At most points in *Faith and War* Settje steer strongly in a social-scientific direction. Its introduction sets up the parameters of the study. “[T]he book,” Settje writes, “seeks to examine a large-cross section of Christianity in as concise a manner as possible” (3). Therefore, he not only restricts his examination to pre-selected publications and proceedings, but limits these to five separate four-to-12 month periods, each corresponding to major crises in the Vietnam War: the war’s early build-up in 1964, the 1968 presidential election, Nixon’s admission of the bombing in Cambodia in 1970, the presidential elections and peace accord of 1972–1973, and North Vietnamese victory in 1975. Chapters one and two address the first two episodes in light of the Cold War and its manifestation in the Vietnam War. Here Settje presents an “American cultural war about foreign affairs” and situates the various Christian parties that make up his study within that cultural war. His main argument is that by the 1960s Christians differed substantively on how to deal with perceived Cold War threats, ranging from a “conservative” concern about “monolithic Communism” to a liberal pursuit of a “humanistic theology.” Chapters three and four take up the next two episodes, arguing that the

Christian response remained diverse, but less so as the Vietnam war and Nixon himself grew more and more unpopular. The conclusion considers Christian opinion in light of the defeat in Vietnam, arguing for an abatement of the “culture war over diplomatic matters” (174).

Though covering a decade’s worth of history and drawing on a variety of sources, Settje does not offer any significant overall thesis. There is little interpretative synthesis. Rather, he offers his book, as he states in the introduction, as a “sampling,” which

... furthers the process of understanding Christian reactions to the Cold and Vietnam wars. It provides a spectrum of belief systems and histories, all of which played into the way a particular periodical or denomination shaped its positions on foreign policy. Not only will this information better illustrate how Christian America reacted to war, participated in it, and contributed to American attitudes about it; it also provides historians with a more accurate sense of U.S. opinions in general during that decade. Liberal, moderate, and conservative Americans all voiced their opinions and shaped the way the United States acted in the world (22).

From the perspective of “history” a passage like this wraps the reader in a suffocating cloth of truisms. But from the perspective of “religion,” now long tamed by laws of society and psychology, Settje’s approach eloquently articulates all that is left for historians of religion to do: provide us with more information to further illustrate what we already know in general.

Indeed, almost none of Settje’s major conclusions in the book challenge any basic assumptions about the period. There are no surprises in *Faith and War*. Those periodicals and denominations we already know to have been more conservative were, we learn, more hawkish about the Cold and Vietnam wars; those we know to have been more liberal were more doveish; and those seen as moderate were, well, moderate. As a representative conclusion in *Faith and War* states,

Conservative Christians feared communism and saw little reason to soften their position regarding it. Liberal Christians condemned the United States and Communist nations together for their hostility and militarization. And still other American Christians sat somewhere between the polar opposites, grappling with pragmatic concerns about both Communist tyranny and the danger of maintaining a hostile posture by the United States. Theology and politics played a role in these reactions, sometimes exclusively, sometimes together (126).

Again, from the perspective of “history” such passages are frustratingly un-insightful. In its effort to complete the historical record, *Faith and War* seems to repeatedly move from truism to tautology. While it is true that we are offered more “information,” and no doubt for some this information will prove valuable in one way or another, none of our basic assumptions, none of our common knowledge, indeed none of our prejudices are challenged.

Perhaps save one: religion matters. Settje begins the final section of the book, aptly titled “Lessons Learned,” by writing “Christian America both reflected and shaped opinions about the Cold and Vietnam wars during the 1960s and 1970s. Christianity therefore played a pivotal role in this national culture debate” (176). Religion mattered, he seems to say, as it functioned as a medium of public opinion in broader American debates about the Cold and Vietnam wars. This seems to be the exigency behind *Faith and War*, the urgency behind its substantial research effort. The history of religion is a valid and indeed necessary aspect of the larger historiographical enterprise. Religion matters.

It is unfortunate that this is not a truism. It is clear that under the regime of modern historiography the history of religion, or more narrowly “church history,” has been something of a stepchild of History. As Hobbes and other 17th-century political theorists sought to elevate the state above religion (a process begun at the Peace of Augsburg), so eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historiography elevated the state to the apogee of the historical process. Modern historiography has relentlessly taken the state and its surrogates as the only fully legitimate subjects of History. That “cultural history” has recently enjoyed purchase only confirms this observation, for cultural history comes as the state has become so intertwined with society as to make distinguishing the two practically impossible. As F.R. Ankersmit (*Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy beyond Fact and Value* 1996) has suggested, the Foucauldian “introduction of the dimension of politics even into the most private and intimate aspects of the individual’s daily life” stems from a state-centric conception of history — only as the welfare state became involved in what Tocqueville referred to as the “minor details of life” did historiography begin to take seriously these details (64, 109–110).

In this respect, it is one of the virtues of the sociological mode in which Settje works as a historian that it refuses the state its supposed rightful place within History. “American Christianity” appears in *Faith and War* as a complex phenomenon guided by its own “belief systems and histories” that in turn exerts its influence *upon the state* as American

Christianity reflected and shaped public opinion about the Vietnam and Cold wars. If the category “religion” belies a sociological triumph, that triumph had paradoxical implications for its subject: in one sense it tamed religion, making it conform to the laws of society and psychology; but in another sense it preserved for religion its own distinct, semi-autonomous space over and against the hegemony of the state. Even if religion cannot be “historical,” in rendering it “sociological” it gains its own semi-autonomous place within history.

Jonathan P. Herzog, in addressing a topic similar to that of Settje — the role of religion in America’s Cold War — seems discontented with any sociological rendering of religion. Herzog argues that America’s Cold War leaders constructed a “spiritual-industrial complex” alongside the infamous military-industrial complex. The former, Herzog argues, was as “factory-made” as the latter; it was just as much a product of elite interests, policy, and design as was the massive build-up in the Cold War military arsenal (7, 161). The result was a spectacular growth in American religious enthusiasm in the 1950s, a religious revival of historic dimensions. But this was, Herzog writes, “a religious revival that was conceived in boardrooms rather than camp meetings, steered by Madison Avenue and Hollywood suits rather than traveling preachers, and measured with a statistical precision that old-time revivalists like Charles Grandison Finney or Dwight Moody would have envied” (7).

For, Herzog argues, America’s elite quickly came to see that one of the most effective means of constructing a Cold War consensus would be by portraying the geopolitical conflict with the Soviets as one between theism and atheism or, better, the “spiritual” and “material.” Herzog argues that the result was a “sacralization” of Cold War conflict and indeed of America, a surprising reversal of not only what had been a trend toward secularization in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, but also of the logic of civil religion (11). Whereas civil religion has to do with “the use of the sacred to legitimize the secular,” early cold warriors did the reverse: “Rather than seeing religion as a means simply to buttress the state, they used the secular to legitimize the sacred” (179).

Herzog’s book traces this transformation, devoting its early chapters to the first half of the twentieth century, showing how anxieties over rapid industrialization, Darwinian science, the New Deal, and Communism planted the seeds for what, in Cold War America, would become the spiritual-industrial complex. The middle portion of the book takes up the “sacralization” project itself, examining a range of figures and institutions that together joined forces to convince Americans that spiritual

commitments, if not precisely religious devotion, would be integral to the survival of America. These figures and institutions range from Truman and Eisenhower, to Whittaker Chambers and Henry Luce's *Time*, to Major General Charles Carpenter's "character-guidance program" in the United States Air Force, to the efforts of the National Education Association, to those of the U.S. Congress to insert "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance and make "In God We Trust" the national motto. Part three looks at the consequences and legacies of the Cold War spiritual-industrial complex. Herzog argues that while we see a tremendous growth in spiritual rhetoric and religious-group membership in the 1950s, and a more fundamental change in public opinion against secularization, at the center of the transformation was a type of American "believer" that the historian William Lee Miller, speaking of Eisenhower, characterized as "a very fervent believer in a very vague religion" (174). Though not a study of the rise of the Religious Right, Herzog suggests that it drew heavily upon the early Cold War talking points of the spiritual-industrial complex: "Belief that Communism was a religious doctrine best withstood by the propagation of a counter faith; assertions that American society depended on a religious base; assumptions that the nation's institutions were central to the maintenance of spiritual energy; claims that America's material power flowed from its capacity to maintain a cohesive moral order" (197). While Communism faded from the rhetorical repertoire of post-Cold War America, these latter talking points do indeed still endure in important sectors of American political culture.

Herzog's history is well-written and richly researched, and it is hard to quibble with the particulars. Some of the larger claims, however, can be challenged. Herzog attends far too little to what I have argued elsewhere was a reciprocal relationship between the "material" and the "spiritual" in the early Cold War (*Spirits of the Cold War: Contesting Worldviews in the Classical Age of American Security Strategy* 2012). It is not just that figures like Eisenhower argued that America's material power flowed from a spiritual fount, it was that this argument helped create the cultural and ideological conditions for the aggressive pursuit of an overwhelming nuclear arsenal and its component parts. That is to say, all the rhetoric of "spirit" Herzog so ably discusses was not just "sacralizing" American political culture, it provided a kind of cover for the rise of the military-industrial complex, which, in light of widespread postwar fears of a garrison state, would not have otherwise been tolerated. Herzog suggests this relationship, but does not fully consider its significance.

But rather than elaborate on this or other criticisms of Herzog's argument, I want focus here on the fact that I *could* argue with Herzog's thesis, and on a substantive level. By contrast, Settje's *Faith and War* does not invite such argument, for there is little in it that amounts to major interpretive arguments. In Herzog's book, by contrast, we have a *history* first and foremost.

Indeed, it is interesting in this regard that in his introduction Herzog works to distance his book from "a religious history." Herzog notes that while some may read it as such, it is at best a "peculiar" one, for "Secular, not religious, leaders and institutions are the main actors, and that is the point" (12). Here we see just how complicated the history of religion is, given the power of the sociological conception of "religion." It is not just that the lines between the sacred and the secular, the religious and non-religious, church and state, etc. become fuzzy — a phenomenon sociology has helped confirm and analyze — it is that "religion" or the "religious" start to surprise us, acting in ways that we would not predict or anticipate. For example, Herzog notes that some of the most vocal critics of Cold War sacralization were those groups and institutions most devoted to religious revival. It was precisely the vagueness of America's spiritual revival that bothered groups like the National Catholic Welfare Conference, who worried that all this newfound religiosity was merely "lip service" (143). While Herzog offers an overall thesis having to do with a trend toward "sacralization" in the early Cold War, his is a messy history, one that is indeed quite full of surprises. In a characteristically *historical* mode, Herzog notes in his introduction, almost as an aside, that he conceives of "religion" as having an "ever-changing relationship with American society" (9). Moreover, he admits that he is not even sure "religion" should enjoy a place of privilege in his history at all: "'spiritual' is vaguer than 'religious,' and this ambiguity became a topic of increasingly heated argument throughout the 1950s" (7).

The messiness of such categories together with the insights of the stories Herzog tells makes *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex* a fine work of history. Yet, one wonders, in light of the hegemony of the state over History, if the elegance of Herzog's study is not due in part to his willing submission to that hegemony. Whereas in reading Settje's *Faith and War* one confronts a concerted effort to insist "religion matters," the message of Herzog's book is, alas, it matters because it matters to the state.