

Lippmann rejected Dulles's ecumenical brand of Christian nationalism, and no amount of birds Foster watched and catalogued could change that. Nevertheless, Wilsey works harder than previous biographers to show that Dulles was more than the sum of his controversial politics. He is to be commended for offering a holistic, sympathetic portrait of a world-renowned Christian diplomat that Carol Burnett once made a fool of herself over (188).

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***The Rise and Fall of the Religious Left: Politics, Television, and Popular Culture in the 1970s and Beyond.* By L. Benjamin Rolsky. Columbia Series on Religion and Politics. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. xvi + 256 pp. \$105.00 cloth; \$35.00 paper.**

The history of the Religious Left in the United States during the 1970s is often told as a story of passive decline. Its institutions, torn apart by conflict over Civil Rights and the Vietnam War, faded toward insignificance in the face of a resurgent Christian Right. That narrative, L. Benjamin Rolsky argues, obscures the extent to which religious liberals sowed the seeds of their own demise, especially through their politicization of popular culture during the seventies and eighties.

In Rolsky's view, Norman Lear was the exemplar of the Religious Left's ill-fated approach to cultural and political engagement, and his career "serves as the paradigmatic example of liberal religious motivation" against the claims of conservatives (5). In programs like *All in the Family* and in his work as founder of People for the American Way (PFAW), Lear also functioned as "one of the more significant interpreters of the 'New Right'" for Americans as conservative Christians mobilized during the late 1970s and 1980s (3).

Over five chapters, Rolsky engages with a deep body of research and an impressive range of scholarship from multiple disciplines to explore the many facets of Lear's work. After first providing a biographical sketch that explores the factors that led Lear to create relevant television programming, Rolsky devotes his second chapter to *All in the Family*. This popular sitcom, Rolsky persuasively shows, embodied Lear's desire to model the ideal of "deliberative democracy" on the small screen (61). Each week, the show's characters debated contentious topics not "to identify the single best option when it came to politics and American religion but rather to expose his viewers to the diversity of a single issue in all its complications" (69). Rolsky further chronicles Lear's contribution to the greater politicization of programming in the years that followed: his opposition to a mandated Family Viewing Hour, his exploration of abortion on *Maude*, and his role organizing a conference in 1981 to address the proliferation of advocacy groups focused on television content. The final chapters carefully analyze the formation of PFAW and its public engagement, particularly the "I Love Liberty" television special that "theatrically enacted Lear's civil religious vision" (159).

These considerations of Lear's multifaceted career lead Rolsky to a number of provocative, compelling conclusions. Foremost among these is that Lear mistook his

personal political and religious values for universal principles essential for American civic life, and his programs' depictions of deliberative democracy were thus more overtly political than he acknowledged. As Rolsky suggests, "one could argue that it was not Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson who first politicized the American family over the airwaves or subjected it to the political interests of the American party system" (71). It was instead Lear and his associates, with a message that was the "product of liberally minded religious and spiritual actors writing on behalf of their own self-interests" (40). Religious conservatives retaliated in an attempt to defend their political vision, and they proved more adept at using media to build grassroots support.

Liberals like Lear did not merely help to ignite the culture war, Rolsky argues. They also perpetuated it by suggesting that conservatives were unworthy of participation in civic life because they saw little merit in deliberative discussion that recognized diverse perspectives. As Rolsky aptly notes, although the Religious Right "represented a particular facet of the diversity that Lear and others defended rhetorically, it ultimately functioned as a discursive 'other' against which religious liberals could leverage their oppositional political identities as defenders of the American Way" (112).

Beyond noting how religious liberals' narrow vision fueled the culture wars, this volume makes an equally important contribution by showing that Lear's politics were heavily nostalgic. "Civil-minded interfaith groups, along with the Protestant mainline, exemplified what Lear and PFAW supported as the American Way of doing politics," Rolsky writes (130). Given that these institutions had their heyday decades earlier, this is an important recognition that religious liberals' idealization of progress did not render them immune to nostalgia.

While Rolsky makes a compelling case for Lear's cultural and political influence, the argument for Lear as a leader of the Religious Left proves less persuasive. To be sure, Rolsky has performed a significant service by adding to our understanding of how the values of religious liberalism have been expressed in American culture apart from well-studied institutions like the National Council of Churches or the National Conference of Christians and Jews. At times, however, Rolsky seems to suggest that Lear himself provided the guiding vision for these institutions, noting, for instance, that Lear "set the spiritual agenda . . . for much of mainline Protestantism" (104). That is a bold, intriguing claim. Yet it is not fully explored in the book, with relatively little discussion of how mainline Protestant or interfaith institutions adopted Lear's particular outlook as opposed to simply sharing broad commitments (one brief discussion of Lear and the National Council of Churches is considered primarily from the perspective of an article in *Christianity Today*).

Ironically, Rolsky's study of Lear brings much-needed nuance to our understanding of the Religious Right, presenting it "less as a monolithic religio-political entity and more as a disparate collection of individual, organization, and grassroots interests" (11). This nuance is partially offset, however, by the linking of Lear with the wider Religious Left in an argument that feels underdeveloped. Still, Lear is unquestionably an important figure in his own right, and Rolsky's study contributes immensely to our understanding of his work at the intersection of religion, culture, and politics in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s.

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