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## Pushing the Faith: Proselytism and Civility in a Pluralistic World (Book Review)

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*Pushing the Faith: Proselytism and Civility in a Pluralistic World.* Edited by Martin E. Marty and Frederick E. Greenspahn. New York: Crossroad, 1988, 190 pp., \$19.95.

The fifth in the Jewish and Christian Traditions series, this compendium is the result of a consultation at Denver University's Center for Judaistic Studies. Contributors come from a range of theological, historical, and social science faculties.

If there is a unifying substratum, it is a commitment to religious pluralism and an aversion to any kind of proselytism. The stated goal is the alleviation of "the tension between the apparent demands of . . . theological rhetoric and the convention of social pluralism" (xi).

Given the pluralism of contemporary society, B. Johnson asserts that any kind of proselytism or evangelism is passé. In fact in order to minimize confrontation all efforts at winning converts must be abandoned. This abandonment is seen to be the "civil" thing to do (18).

Writing from the Jewish perspective, R. Goldberg agrees. He sees the genius of rabbinical Judaism in its achievement of a detente with other religions. Although other religionists "develop acceptable traditions and live acceptable lives," they are not to be compared with the ethical and religious values of Judaism (40). Still the rabbis adopted a "live and let live" attitude toward non-Jews.

Conversion to Judaism is not cultivated by overt efforts. Today it is far more frequently the product of interfaith marriages. Writes R. Seltzer: "The conversion to Judaism of the non-Jewish partner is a significant factor in maintaining the size of the American Jewish community against a shrinkage resulting from assimilation and a low birthrate" (60-61).

In an effort to plumb the depths of history concerning the missionary movement, J. Gager cites two primary motivators: He sees eschatological hope as the main mover, and he sees a counterbalancing zeal that reacts to doubt as the second cause (77).

When it comes to a consideration of the method of mission, W. Hutchison sees the first wave of Protestant mission as an effort to civilize the pagan. Civilization overrode evangelization. It was D. J. Fleming who tried to rectify this, although it was never quite eradicated (89). Hutchison does applaud the return of evangelicalism to a social conscience following the Lausanne Congress of 1974.

Writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, R. Schreiter surveys the eras of Catholic missions: 1919-62, the period of certainty; 1962-65, the period of ferment; 1965-75, the period of missionary crisis; 1975 onward, the rebirth of the missionary movement. Proselytism has declined in Catholic mission since Vatican II, when the Church was enlarged to embrace true believers.

In a caricature of contemporary fundamentalism, N. Ammerman accuses fundamentalists of everything from incivility to racism. Her venom is poured out especially on Jews for Jesus, who in her eyes tend to violate "the sensibilities of most urban Americans" (115).

Representing the evangelical school of thought, N. Malony discusses seriously "The Psychology of Proselytism." He is most objective in his contribution. Without resorting to hackneyed jargon Malony gives a serious discussion of the psychology of both the evangelist and the convert.

A well-informed contribution is J. Richardson's discussion of proselytism and the newer religions. He sets side by side the Unification Church, Hare Krishna and the Jesus Movement. He then draws an extremely helpful portrait of the conversion and resocialization process (154).

Perhaps the best chapter of all is Marty's conclusion. He senses the seriousness of proselytism as one worldview confronts another. He questions, rightly so, the lack of interaction with the theological issues implicit in proselytism. Marty concludes: "This is a book, then, that deals much more easily with pluralism and politeness than with proselytization" (162).

Marty's critique is perhaps softer than mine would be. There is a lamentable lack of theological sophistication among the contributors. Their rather uncritical devotion to the ideal of pluralism limits their ability to assess mission and evangelism. As Ammerman put it: "One of the ironies of pluralism and civility is that we pluralists spend most of our time talking to those who already understand us and agree with us" (121-122). One might call this "preaching to the converted."

In all of the contributions there appear two further glaring deficiencies. First, there is little or no meaningful treatment of the Scriptural bases of evangelism. Second, there is also a woeful lack of comprehension of the breadth of the history of evangelism and mission.

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*The Encyclopedia of American Religions: Religious Creeds: A Compilation of More than 450 Creeds, Confessions, Statements of Faith, and Summaries of Doctrine of Religious and Spiritual Groups in the United States and Canada.* Edited by J. Gordon Melton. 1st ed. Detroit: Gale Research, 1988, xxiii + 838 pp., \$125.00. *A Guide to Foreign Missionary Manuscripts in the Presbyterian Historical Society.* By Frederick J. Heuser, Jr. Bibliographies and Indexes in World History 11. Westport: Greenwood, 1988, xxv + 108 pp., \$39.95. *Religion Journals and Serials: An Analytical Guide.* Compiled by Eugene C. Fieg, Jr. Annotated Bibliographies of Serials: A Subject Approach 13. Westport: Greenwood, 1988, xxvii + 218 pp., \$45.00.

Once again Melton has produced a massive, pioneering reference work that should greatly aid students of contemporary American religious history. Once again his work is open to charges of hasty and uneven editing. But his overall contribution far outstrips any flaws along the way, most of which are easily corrected. *Religious Creeds* is significant in its own right, but it is particularly important as an expansion of his more basic *Encyclopedia of American Religions* (2d ed. and supp., 1987), bringing yet another dimension to his monumental project of describing, documenting and classifying the over 1500 primary religious bodies (i.e. denominations, sects and cults) in the United States and Canada, the majority of which he was the first to identify within the context of a systematic scholarly survey.

Melton does not give a creed or doctrinal statement for every group he has discovered. Many lack them, or refuse to disclose them, or simply adopt statements previously formulated by other religious bodies. But he has compiled far more material relevant to the present religious scene in America than anyone else has to date. And, as in his previous publications, his special achievement is to locate unique or extremely marginal items that others have overlooked. Where else would one readily find "Articles of Our Faith" for the International Church of Ageless Wisdom or the "Statement of Faith" for the gnostic Federation of St. Thomas Christian Churches?