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American Religions and the Family: How Faith Traditions Cope with Modernization and Democracy

Don S. Browning

David A. Clairmont

Loren Marks

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Don S. Browning and David A. Clairmont, eds.
*American Religions and the Family: How Faith Traditions
Cope with Modernization and Democracy.*
New York: Columbia University Press, 2007

Reviewed by Loren Marks

This fifteen-chapter volume addresses two key questions: (a) How do various American religions negotiate the pressures of *modernization*, such as technology, the speed of life, and consumerism? and (b) How do various American religions wrestle with challenging aspects of *democracy*, such as heightened individualism, the social reconstruction of morality, and the waning acceptance of traditional authority? Chapter-length responses to these questions are offered by a carefully selected array of social scientists, historians, theologians, and legal scholars.

The volume is stimulating, readable, and relevant. The lead editor, Don S. Browning, summarily states, “Studies about the effect of religious thought and behavior on American society have never been more timely or more important. People around the world are discovering that recent global political and economic events cannot be understood in their fullness without comprehending something about religion” (vii–viii). Indeed, a working knowledge of the relationships between cultures and religions is important, and this book offers much to facilitate that understanding.

The editors frame the volume by commenting on the accelerating pace of life and dramatic moral shifts that have occurred in recent years. They then offer a framework that identifies how different faiths have responded, countered, and adapted to these changes. Included in this faith-response framework are the five approaches of *evolution* (flexibly bending with the times and environment); *accommodation* (integrating some environmental and cultural shifts while rejecting others); *modulation of distinctiveness* (adjusting or heightening distinctive aspects of religious identity in response to events or trends); *transformation* (altering a religion so that it

will fit into a new cultural setting—the Americanization of Buddhism, for example); and *strategic limitation* (which involves carefully limiting the use of potentially damaging but also beneficial cultural developments—for example, the LDS Church’s use of the Internet for public relations but outspoken stance against Internet pornography).

Two extensions of this five-part framework not highlighted in the book are that, first, the framework is useful not only in analyzing major religions, it is also applicable to individual congregations. Second, and perhaps most importantly to LDS readers, the framework is a valuable heuristic device in considering our *families*. Indeed, many readers may find themselves internalizing some elements of the book by asking if and when they (and their families) have “evolved,” “accommodated,” or engaged in “strategic limitation” in connection with often dangerous modern cultural forces (8). Whether or not the dominant themes of the book lead to personal introspection, the volume offers plenty of food for thought, as the following chapter overviews indicate.

Paul D. Numrich drives home a key theme in his chapter “Immigrant American Religions and the Family” (20) by citing one study wherein two-thirds of the immigrants surveyed “either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that ‘America is an immoral, corrupt society’” (26). For many such immigrants, pursuing the financial American Dream involves high moral risks, particularly for their children.

W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Williamson, who address mainline Protestant family ideology and practice, observe that a core contradiction of this tradition seems to be that there is much of politically “walking right, [and] talking left” (52.) Specifically, the authors argue that despite the many leaders and intellectuals in mainline Protestantism who condone and even promote alternative family forms, much of the involved, lay membership is comprised of more traditional, nuclear families.

Margaret Bendroth’s discussion of Evangelical Christians illustrates that the gulf between Evangelical rhetoric and dominant American culture seems to be considerably wider than the rift between how mainstream Americans and Evangelicals actually live. Whether discussing family values, male headship, or the waning Promise Keepers movement, Bendroth sees Evangelicals as different, but not as different as many insiders (or outsiders) view them to be.

Raymond Bucko’s chapter, entitled “Native American Families and Religion,” utilizes the metaphor of Native Americans as the fragile “miners’ canary” (65) that is the first to fail in the toxic, gaseous mineshaft, thereby alerting others to danger. Bucko outlines violence, oppression,

religious intolerance, and government usurpation as some of the hazardous cultural “gases” to which Native American families have been exposed. As an aside, a cursory knowledge of LDS history will sensitize the reader to parallels between some of the challenges faced by both Native Americans and early Mormons.

Julie Hanlon Rubio’s “Marriage, Family, and the Modern Catholic Mind” (87) focuses on ethics, papal encyclicals, and formal documents that have been issued across time, particularly during the twentieth century. Rubio reviews scholarly criticism of these documents, including calls to “get real about sex” and other family-related issues (93). Rubio tends to sympathize with scholarly critics and contends that because “the church is not ‘real’ about sex or gender, it has found it difficult to be recognized as a prophetic critic of modernity” (95).

Robert M. Franklin’s chapter, “Generative Approaches to Modernity, Discrimination, and Black Families,” does not shy away from controversial topics including racism, discrimination, the effects of slavery, interracial marriage, and gendered (dual) moral standards of sexual behavior. Franklin not only describes African American families in connection with religion, he also goes a step further than most of the authors in the volume and offers recommendations regarding what needs to change and how it might be done—including a call to African American churches and mosques to play a stronger and more explicit role in supporting families.

The chapter on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is authored by David C. Dollahite, the editor and coeditor of two previous volumes that outline the real-world value of “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”¹ Dollahite uses the Proclamation as an outline and directly cites much of it during the course of the chapter. Dollahite, an LDS convert at 18 and a full-time missionary at 19, softens his convert’s zeal and enthusiasm, but they are never far from the surface. Dollahite’s perspective results in a more subjective but “close to home” chapter that offers a rich portrait many LDS readers may profitably share with nonmember friends.

Following additional chapters on Jewish, Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic families, the late Lee E. Teitelbaum addresses the state of family law in modern America. The volume concludes with David A. Clairmont’s explanation of some challenges that accompany the effort to understand and appreciate the distinct visions of family life in American religion. He finishes the volume by stating that “the personal and social complexities of religious life” have become “one of the defining issues of our time” (255).

For me, the volume was a worthwhile read, not only because the diverse authors informed and offered insight, but also because the book's central messages implicitly prompted a series of intensely personal- and family-level questions. These introspections might be circumscribed by the question, "Am I most influenced by ever-changing modern American culture or by the faith I profess?"

Loren Marks (lorenm@lsu.edu) is Associate Professor at Louisiana State University in the School of Human Ecology. He received his BS and MS at Brigham Young University and his PhD from the University of Delaware. He has authored 35 publications on religion and/or family life and is married to Sandy Martindale, also a BYU alum (BS, 1998). They have five children and actively serve in the Baton Rouge Louisiana Stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

1. David C. Dollahite, ed. *Strengthening Our Families: An In-Depth Look at the Proclamation on the Family* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2000); Craig Hart and David C. Dollahite, eds., *Helping and Healing Our Families: Principles and Practices Inspired by The Family: A Proclamation to the World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005).