4-1-1984

Eerdmans' Handbook to Christianity in America Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, George M. Marsden, David F. Wells, and John D. Woodbridge, eds.

Milton V. Backman

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol24/iss2/18

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in BYU Studies Quarterly by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Reviewed by Milton V. Backman, Jr., professor of Church history and doctrine, Brigham Young University.

Describing multiple aspects of a complex religious history is a task that could penetrate sensitive subjects, controversial themes,
diverse beliefs, and trends difficult to identify and summarize. To obtain accuracy and to assure just such objectivity, the five editors of *Eerdmans' Handbook of Christianity in America* sought assistance from sixty-five contributors. These included some of the best-known scholars of religious history, such as Sidney Ahlstrom, Martin E. Marty, and Edwin S. Gaustad. The editors wrote a brief history of religious developments in America, dividing this narrative into four major sections—"God and the Colonies"; "Christianity and Democracy: From the Revolution to the Civil War"; "The Era of Crisis: From Christendom to Pluralism"; and "Christianity in a Secular Age: From the Depression to the Present." This general history serves as a setting and introduction for succinct essays (two or three pages) on people and movements. Reproductions of documents, citations of provocative statements by religious leaders and writers, maps, charts, timelines, and more than three-hundred and fifty photographs are also inserted in the general narrative.

One of the strengths of this generally well-written work is the accumulation of knowledge from its various contributors. But the flow of the work is interrupted by the innumerable insertions and conflicting writing styles. Although a few authors tend to be wordy and ambiguous, most write with clarity. This handbook includes outstanding yet brief descriptions of religious trends in America as well as many exceptional religiously oriented biographical essays (such as sketches identifying contributions and beliefs of Anne Hutchinson, Abraham Lincoln, Elizabeth Seaton, Frederick Douglass, Billy Graham, and Martin Luther King, Jr.). This work, however, is weakened by inadequate historical sketches of some faiths (such as the Southern Baptist Convention, Disciples of Christ, Christian Church, Church of Christ, and Seventh-day Adventists) and by controversial statements or glaring errors in other accounts (such as in the essays on Christian Science and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). The handbook also lacks consistency in describing belief patterns of religious communities. Some essays include references to unique beliefs (such as some beliefs of Christian Scientists and Jehovah's Witnesses), but other articles (such as the essays on Seventh-day Adventists and Latter-day Saints) show almost a total absence of such information.

Moreover, a few statements regarding church membership and activity would be challenged by many scholars of religious history. The narrative describing religion in colonial America (basically describing the thirteen colonies that became the United States),
makes a reference generally endorsed by writers in this field that only five percent of the adults in the southern colonies were members of a church. After citing this estimate, one historian suggests that at the end of the colonial period more than half of all Americans attended church regularly (pp. 75–77). That membership of the Roman Catholic faith in this country in 1860 was 3.5 million also seems too high an estimate (p. 235).

The main narrative contains few references to Mormonism or Joseph Smith, and the charts identifying major religious groups in America make no mention of this faith. The major reference to Mormonism in the main narrative is under the subheading “Radical and Social Reform: Thomas and Mary Nichols.” One editor writes, “A world of confusing and fluid expectations spawned schemes which seemed as imminently plausible a century and a half ago as they seem bizarre today” (p. 196), such as various health reform movements, phrenology, mesmerism, spiritualism, and free love. “In this climate, it was no accident that the 1830s saw the genesis of the Mormons and the Millerites” (p. 196). And one of the few references to Joseph Smith in the main narrative is a quotation (without any indication of a source; not using footnotes is a common practice in most general textbooks): “Of Joseph Smith it was said that he had ‘his own original eloquence, peculiar to himself, not polished, not studied, not smoothed and softened by education and refined by art’ ” (p. 178). Although the work is primarily historical and contains few references to the patterns of faith of various denominations, the only references to Mormonism in the latter part of the handbook are that Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons are more unorthodox than Seventh-day Adventists (p. 302) and that Mormons are a “distinctive doctrinal break” from Christianity (p. 400). In harmony with many other non-Mormon publications, this work emphasizes that Mormonism and the Book of Mormon are products of the times, representing popular teachings proclaimed in western New York during the 1820s. However, the handbook fails to note the similarities of early beliefs of Latter-day Saints with beliefs held by early Christians, by people during the Middle Ages, or by those during the Reformation.

Most of the information about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is included in a three-page essay written by Lawrence Foster. Author of Religion and Sexuality (Oxford, 1981), Foster is an associate professor of American history at Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. Although this historian is generally more sympathetic and often more reliable in his presentations on Mormonism than many
other non-LDS scholars, he makes several mistakes in unfolding a brief history of the Latter-day Saints. He writes that “after a series of visionary experiences beginning in the early 1820s, Smith concluded that all existing religions were wrong” (p. 200). Since Foster does not accept as reliable history the account of the First Vision included in the Pearl of Great Price, he does not mention in his essay that Joseph Smith testified that the Father and the Son visited him in the spring of 1820 and told him at that time that he should join none of the churches. Other statements in this essay which misrepresent the views of a high percentage of active Latter-day Saints relate to the Book of Mormon and the other standard works. For example, Foster contends that the Book of Mormon “is a highly complex work of the religious imagination which addressed and provided answers for most of the religious questions that had been troubling people in areas of the Northeast such as the one in which Smith grew up” (p. 200). Foster further implies that Latter-day Saints believe the standard works contain a “synthesis of all previously valid human truth” (p. 201). His statement describing why Latter-day Saints were persecuted prior to the exodus west is an oversimplification. “Their view of themselves as a chosen people with an almost tribal loyalty to the group frightened Americans who believed in religious and social pluralism” (p. 201). Unfortunately, Foster’s condensation precipitates some of these inaccuracies and inadequate explanations. Foster makes an effort to summarize the history of the Mormon faith in a few pages (pp. 200–2); he even attempts to describe the history of Mormonism from Brigham Young to the present in one short paragraph.

Because it provides so much data in one place, condensation is a major benefit of any handbook. But no reader should stop with just an outline, however helpful. *Eerdmans’ Handbook* both benefits and suffers from condensation. It ignores, for example, that Mormonism has become one of the largest faiths in America (with a U.S. membership of more than three million) and is currently the fastest-growing denomination of faiths with more than one million members (by percentage) in the United States.

Nevertheless, though the work contains glaring weaknesses, *Eerdmans’ Handbook to Christianity in America* is a major contribution. This book contains the best collection of succinct religiously oriented biographical sketches and summaries of religious trends in America currently available in a one-volume work written for the general public.