Book Review: Maps and Tapestries: Claiming the Sacred and Defining the Secular in America’s Cities
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Now, more than ever, Americans are grappling with this nation’s rich and complex diversity. After struggling for decades with homegrown racisms and phobias that threaten the liberal foundations of our pluralist society, Americans now find themselves in conflict with foreign-based fundamentalisms that also pose a profound danger to that very pluralism. How do Americans embrace and celebrate diversity while at the same time remain unified in the face of such hostility? A form of this question has troubled American historians for quite some time. With the growing recognition of the broad cultural diversity that has long existed in this country, the old grand narrative of Euro-American westward expansion has become increasingly inadequate. Yet, without that framework, it would seem almost impossible to organize the resulting mass of jumbled stories in a coherent and meaningful way. Consequently, historians have searched for an approach that best tells America’s story in light of that recovered multicultural past.

An answer to this question, some suggest, may lie in the fact that America itself is geographically diverse. The boundaries of the United States encompass roaring rivers and meandering streams, high mountains and broad plains, glaciers and deserts, quiet countrysides and dynamic cities. Arriving on this vast and varied stage, many of the world’s different peoples have met and sometimes conflicted or sometimes cooperated in a series of what Earl Lewis
calls “overlapping diasporas.” Accordingly, other historians (such as Shelly Fisher Fishkin, Ronald Takaki, Richard White, and John Demos, to name a few) have proposed that a sense of place, an appreciation of America as a site of encounters between those groups, may form the basis of a new, reimagined American narrative. The task at hand, as Fishkin puts it, is to remap America, to recognize that our history is not simply of westward expansion but also of social and cultural contact across the map and across time.1

Many urban historians, in particular, have taken Fishkin’s suggestion to heart. They have used the map metaphor to examine how various groups of Americans have used urban geography to establish and foster their own cultures outside of or sometimes within official mainstream culture. Throughout this nation’s history, Americans have reinterpreted and exploited public spaces in ways that city planners never anticipated. George Chauncey in *Gay New York*, for example, describes the “sexual topography” of gay culture in New York City between 1890 and 1940. Homosexuals in those decades developed cultural maps of the city that told them where it was safe to be out and where it was not.2 Urban religious historians, particularly Robert Orsi, also have made effective use of the map metaphor. When he began *The Madonna of 115th Street* by declaring “This is a study of religion in the streets,” Orsi laid the foundation for a cartographical means of understanding how religion functions in urban America. What he called a “theology of the streets” allows people of faith to interpret (or “frame,” as some sociologists would say) the varied physical and cultural geographies of the city according to their particular religious beliefs and practices.3

All three of the books under review in this essay use or are influenced by this cartographical metaphor. Here, however, framing may be seen as not only a passive reinterpretation of the cityscape but also an active engagement with the city. Diane Winston’s *Red-Hot and Righteous*, for example, tracks the arrival, movement, and development of the Salvation Army on these shores since the late nineteenth century, describing how that faith influenced and was influenced by the urban American environment. Kenneth Heineman’s *A Catholic New Deal* similarly examines the growing activism of working-class immigrant Catholics in the dark days of the Depression, noting in particular how their churches served as loci of religious, cultural, and political action in Pittsburgh. Finally, Orsi’s own *Gods of the City* is a series of studies of diverse faiths and their impact on and evolution within today’s American cities. Each of these monographs, then, suggest that religious experience in America’s cities can be described as a map where faith affects and is affected by the urban environment.

Taking these books together, however, problematizes that cartographic metaphor. Clearly the United States exhibits a wide diversity of belief. Americans are Roman Catholics or Japanese Presbyterians, Sunni Muslims or Hindus, Orthodox Jews or Jews for Jesus, believers or unbelievers. These religious groups impact the urban environment, and each other, to one degree or another.
Yet, in addition to this diversity and activism among believers, America is also characterized by a strong separation between church and state. Religion is supposed to occupy and influence the private sphere while government (or perhaps commerce) reigns in that of the public. How can America’s diverse religions—separated on the map by space and in history by time— influence the cities’ public spaces at all? Is it simply a matter of religion overstepping its boundaries? Furthermore, it is clear that the city also can influence religion. Is that simply a matter of the secular overstepping its boundaries? When looking at this nation’s wide range of faiths in these circumstances, simply laying one map on top of the other would not seem to provide an answer. If anything, the resulting overlays might muddle the situation. Rather, a different metaphor, one perhaps complementary to the map, might be in order. Taken together, these books suggest that the relationship of America’s urban religions to secular society and to each other might be described as a tapestry. Here, different threads of belief and unbelief weave together—sometimes clashing, sometimes existing in harmony—to create a uniquely American experience of religion and a uniquely American understanding of the relationship between faith and society.

Winston’s *Red-Hot and Righteous* opens with a striking image that easily evokes the map metaphor. On March 10, 1880, eight uniformed members of the Salvation Army, sent from the group’s headquarters in London, disembarked in lower Manhattan. Boldly marching across the dock, they planted a colorful flag and claimed America for God. They then launched a spontaneous worship service, inviting startled customs officials and newspaper reporters to join them. This handful of eccentric immigrants formed the vanguard of a boisterous form of evangelical Protestantism (rooted primarily in a combination of Methodism, Quakerism, and the revivalist Holiness movement) intent on conquering the United States for Christ.

The army’s mission, as it often declared, was to “secularize religion” or to “religionize secular things” (p. 4). In theory, although this mission could mean consecrating anything from activities to relationships, it most often meant making public (or secular) space sacred. In practice, as Winston illustrates, it meant that Salvationists would “invade” the city’s physical spaces, marching into saloons, houses of ill repute, music halls, and arcades to preach the gospel. The army’s most spectacular successes, however, were on the streets. Proclaiming the good news on busy corners or at mass gatherings in places like Greenwich Village’s Abingdon Square, they transformed the city into a “cathedral of the open air.” At the same time, secularizing religion also meant co-opting urban commercial culture in the effort to establish the Kingdom of God in industrial society. Winston describes how the army often used the melodies of popular songs for its hymns. The original landing party in lower Manhattan, for example, sang hymns set to “Sewanee River” and “My Old Kentucky Home.” Salvationists also advertised, turning to the expertise of the influential adman Bruce Barton, for example. And they borrowed from the
conventions of vaudeville and the penny press. Most famously, they staged elaborate parades with brass bands. By World War I, Winston argues, such tactics allowed the army to achieve unheralded success. That same success, however, also produced a concurrent change in its fundamental mission.

For while the Salvation Army was invading the secular city, the city was also making inroads into the Salvation Army. According to Winston, the army’s mission to secularize religion eventually gave it a popular appeal that secular enterprises soon exploited. For example, many Americans found the Salvationists’ brass bands and vaudevilles to be entertaining, and, not surprisingly, the entertainment industry capitalized on that appeal. Starting in the late nineteenth century, a series of Broadway plays and Hollywood movies, culminating in Damon Runyon’s perennially popular *Guys and Dolls*, depicted the army at first with mocking irony and eventually with respect. Thus, Winston says, just as the Salvationists’ attempted to co-opt urban culture, the city co-opted their tactics and identity, allowing the secular to resist sacralization and spurring the army to redefine its mission. By 1917, it had changed from a group of evangelical Protestants proselytizing in the streets to a philanthropic organization serving the material and, to a lesser extent, spiritual needs of the urban poor. In exchange for a change of clothes or a night’s sleep in one of its shelters, the army expected its charges to hear a sermon or a hymn in one of its chapels. Perhaps the most famous symbol of this transformation is the red kettle found across the nation on most street corners and outside shopping malls at Christmastime. The kettle, and the brass band or jingling bell that usually accompany it, is not a proclamation of the gospel but rather a means of collecting donations. Yet Winston does not cast this change as a decline or failure. Rather, it was a strategy by the army to survive in the face of this assault by the city.

The idea of the Salvation Army striking out to conquer the secular for the sacred certainly suggests the map metaphor in Winston’s work. The images of the original tiny vanguard planting its flag in lower Manhattan or of Salvationists gathered together to transform Abingdon Square into a cathedral of the open air portray the army framing the geography of the city according to their particular religious beliefs and practices. At the same time, there are suggestions of the tapestry metaphor in the story of an evangelical, revivalist faith transformed by a pluralist, capitalist society into a primarily philanthropic organization. Here, threads of belief and unbelief are woven together into a uniquely American religion, an eminently practical and pragmatic faith that attempts to feed the soul by filling the stomach. It should be said, however, that Winston could have explored this point more deeply by looking at the Salvation Army’s relationship to other religious and philanthropic organizations in America’s cities. One wonders how the army’s methods have influenced those groups, if at all. How has the Salvationists’ thread colored the American tapestry?

A similar question can be asked of the working-class Catholics in Heineman’s *A Catholic New Deal*. This analysis of labor organizing and social reform in
Depression America addresses the often-overlooked role of religious leaders in such labor activism. In fact, Heineman directly confronts the received wisdom among labor historians that successful industrial unions could not have been formed in the 1930s without workers first rejecting religion. Rather, industrial unions, such as that of Pittsburgh’s steelworkers, were not possible without the support and efforts of Catholic clergy and Catholic leaders within the labor movement. Opposing communism, fascism, and laissez-faire capitalism, priests such as Charles Owen Rice and laypersons such as Philip Murray, a leader of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, labored to achieve a vision of social reform rooted in papal encyclicals such as Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and inspired by the example of Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker movement. Without their efforts and those of many other Catholics, Heineman says, “there would have been no successful union for steel workers” (p. 10).

Unlike Winston’s book, *A Catholic New Deal* does not initially seem to be fertile ground for the map metaphor. One might not expect to find in this tale of labor history much discussion of how people of faith framed urban geography according to their beliefs and practices. Yet Heineman produces a remarkable chapter, “City of God,” that explores how members of various faiths interpreted the city and its inhabitants. He describes, for example, how Pittsburgh’s white Protestants favored African American migrants from the South with whom they shared a common faith instead of Catholic immigrants from Central Europe. In this instance, religion trumped race in the segregation game. In particular, Heineman examines how Catholics read the city’s topography in light of Catholic doctrine and organized that understanding according to the patchwork of different ethnic parishes that checkered Pittsburgh. He notes that this tendency was not new among the city’s Catholic immigrants: “Significantly, the word for ‘settlement’ or ‘village’ in Lithuanian, Polish, and Slovakian was ‘parish.’ Home and church were interchangeable concepts” (p. 88). Recognizing this strong link between national identity and faith, Pittsburgh’s Catholic bishops, like their brothers elsewhere in the country, made sure that each ethnic group in their diocese had “a church and pastor that reflected their national, and often provincial, origins” (p. 89).

As the economic and political crises of the Depression grew, effecting ever-increasing numbers of workers, many priests felt compelled by the plight of their flock and by Catholic social teaching to take action. They transformed their quiet parishes into loci of political action. As an example, Heineman looks to St. Nicholas’s, Pittsburgh’s first Croatian parish. The pastor, Fr. Albert Zagar, rooted his sermons in the teachings of St. Augustine to urge his parishioners to take action. Although the soul belonged in the City of God, Augustine said, people must live in the City of Man. The Depression, Zagar added, made it clear that “it was time to reconstruct the social order so as to prepare people to live in the City of God” (p. 101). Often such political action was accompanied by cultural expressions that located immigrant believers within...
the city’s geography. St. Nicholas’s was no exception. Working with Maxo Vanka, an artist from the Works Progress Administration, Zagar commissioned a series of murals within St. Nicholas’s that were intended to reflect the Croatians’ history and religious vision. On the left side of the high altar, for example, Vanka painted peasants in Croatia praying for a bountiful harvest. On the right side, he contrasted this idyllic picture with a scene of immigrant workers marching into dark, satanic steel mills. Zagar prays nearby for the Croats in this frightening new land. Elsewhere, a “Madonna of the Monongahela Valley” weeps over her son’s broken body, a sacrifice on a fat industrialist’s altar of greed. For Heineman, these murals depict a capitalism run amok, turning the Croatians from simple peasants living in a pastoral “old country” into cheap fodder for America’s factories. Yet Zagar’s prayers offer hope that they will find justice and peace not only in heaven but on earth as well. Here, then, Heineman draws on the map metaphor to illustrate how Pittsburgh’s immigrant Catholics framed the geography of their city according to the church’s social teaching. This reading, he says, then inspired these believers to take part in Pittsburgh’s burgeoning industrial unionism.

Simultaneously, the tapestry metaphor allows the reader to understand how this new activism affected the social and political landscape of the city. For, in confronting the Depression, these immigrant believers did not simply claim territory but also brought their Catholic understanding of faith and of its role in society to a Protestant-dominated America. Heineman notes that, despite their new desire to take political action, many working-class Catholics felt constrained by their faith’s traditional emphasis of the City of God over the City of Man. As a result, they often took an ambiguous stance toward unions and particularly the federal government. In the case of the latter, they feared a centralized secular power yet desired the reforms that only that power could achieve. Heineman notes that Pittsburgh’s Jews, on the other hand, tended not to dwell on the afterlife, making them more inclined to focus on those actions that improved life in the here and now. Building on these religious attitudes toward social action, labor organizers welded a variety of workers into the new industrial unions, giving them a broad base to fight the injustices of laissez-faire capitalism. At the same time, Franklin Delano Roosevelt wove Catholic and Jewish voters together with African American Protestants into a Democratic alliance, acquiring a mandate for his New Deal policies and building a coalition that still exists in part today. Thus, in finding common ground among different understandings of the relationship between the sacred and the secular, the Democrats and labor leaders shaped America’s politics and economy for decades. Unlike Winston, then, Heineman successfully explores the relationship between immigrant, working-class Catholicism and other religions in Pittsburgh and that relationship’s impact on American society and politics.

Whereas Winston and Heineman examine the American religious past, Orsi’s *Gods of the City* explores the implications of the map metaphor in understanding religion in today’s urban landscape. Not only does religion
continue to exist and thrive in our cities but much of what is distinctively American about religion has developed because believers who come to these shores frame the city, its culture, and its geography according to their beliefs. As Orsi notes in his introduction,

City people have acted on and with the spaces of the city to make religious meanings in many different ways. They have appropriated public spaces for themselves and transformed them into venues for shaping, displaying, and celebrating their inherited and emergent ways of life and understandings of the world. They have remapped the city, superimposing their own coordinates of meaning on official cartographies. (p. 47)

This common theme threads through this diverse collection of essays. Karen McCarthy Brown, for example, describes how Haitian immigrants in New York have looked to vodou to adjust to city life by making their apartments and neighborhoods into suitable habitats for various spirits. David H. Brown examines a similar process among adherents of Santería in Miami’s Cuban community. Joanne Punzo Waghorne observes how middle-class Indians have adapted the traditional Hindu temple to the culture and geography of the suburbs of Washington, D.C. There they have created in effect a unique “split-level” temple that claims part of the nation’s capital as sacred space for India’s ancient gods and goddesses. Seattle’s Japanese Presbyterians face a somewhat different problem, according to Madeline Duntley. Driven by ethnic, generational, and cultural divisions that resulted from immigration patterns, these believers have adapted their Christian, Asian, and American roots to the diverse demands of contemporary urban life. The book ends with an essay by Diane Winston that recounts much of the early history of the Salvation Army, which she covered in Red-Hot and Righteous, as the army sought to conquer America’s cities for Christ. Again, the map metaphor underlies each of these essays as believers claim sacred space in the city’s official cartographies. Thus, the same process of framing that allowed English Salvationists and Croatian Catholics to survive in the past aids Indian Hindus, Haitian practitioners of vodou, and Japanese Presbyterians today.

It should not be surprising that the man who helped introduce the map metaphor to the history of religion in America should gather a collection of essays that describe how believers create counternarratives to the official narrative of the cityscape, the grand narrative written by architects and city planners. The cartographical metaphor works well in individually addressing each faith. It clearly defines and describes how believers frame their urban environments in the light of faith. Yet in relating these various counternarratives to each other and to the official narrative, one can lose that clarity. In his introductory essay to this volume, Orsi declares, “American cities are composed of complex topographies of interleaved, sometimes incongruous domains of experience and possibility” (p. 54). Rather than clarifying the situation, Orsi seems to suggest the muddle that arises when we layer one map on top of another. Orsi’s
anthology, however, does offer insight into understanding the tapestry metaphor when taking these essays together. Although not actually using this metaphor, at times he uses language and imagery that suggests the tapestry might serve as a means of understanding the relationship of one faith to another and of the sacred to the secular in the contemporary American city.

It was through their religious displays that urban people announced in their own voices the heterogeneity of the cities. Through religious practice . . . immigrants and migrants staked a claim to living in a particular kind of nation. It has been by their religious practice as much as their politics that migrants and immigrants joined the national debate about pluralism, multiculturalism, and heterogeneity. (P. 48)

This approach, suggesting the sometimes harmonious, sometimes conflicting threads in the national tapestry, provides more clarity and greater understanding than simply overlaying one religious map on top of another. It offers greater insight into understanding the complex, often frustrating relationships between the counternarratives of various faiths and the official narrative of secular culture, as well as among themselves. From a wider perspective, then, the silken maps of various beliefs in America’s cities are woven like silken threads into our national tapestry.

In comparing these widely diverse studies, the tapestry metaphor provides a useful guiding narrative to organize the jumbled threads of the history of religion in America’s cities in a coherent and meaningful way. It offers a way to understand the relationship of faiths to one another and to the secular. Clearly, as these studies demonstrate, the line between the sacred and the secular is frequently thin. Yet, upon closer reading, this metaphor may offer greater insight into the nature of the secular. In fact, it may allow scholars to see secular space—the tapestry of public life—as woven together from those various threads of belief and unbelief. Contrary to current understandings, the secular in America may be seen not as the absence of religion but as that space where belief (and unbelief) meet in an uneven, sometimes tenuous, but still tenacious toleration.

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NOTES


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