

Rodriguez, Luis Carlos

Schmidt, Leigh (2012). Restless souls: The making of American spirituality from Emerson to Oprah, Second edition with a new preface

Sacra. 2017, vol. 15, iss. 1, pp. 84-86

ISSN 1214-5351 (print); ISSN 2336-4483 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/137884>

Access Date: 17. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Schmidt, Leigh (2012). *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah, Second Edition with a New Preface*

Berkeley: University of California Press, 336 p.
ISBN: 978-0520273672

Luis Carlos Rodriguez, FA MU, Department for the Study of Religions
e-mail: luizcarloz@mail.muni.cz

In this second edition of his original 2006 publication, former Princeton professor and religious historian Leigh Schmidt gives a detailed, thorough presentation and analysis of the liberal brand of American spirituality that began with Transcendentalist writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman. Heavily influenced by Eastern philosophical thought, these writers championed a progressive, unorthodox spirituality that sought to overcome dogmatic and authoritarian religious thinking. They placed an emphasis on the individual to seek spirituality and ethical self-cultivation through practices rooted in meditative solitude and mystical experience. These writers also stressed social and, at times, political activism to spread the ideas of spiritual liberty and religious tolerance and universalism. As Schmidt's book illustrates, this liberal and progressive spiritual tradition continued later on with groups like the Quakers, Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, and the School of New Thought, as well as thinkers such as the Neo-Vedanta mystic Swami Vivekananda, philosopher William James, and African-American scholar W. E. B. Dubois. This tradition, according to Schmidt, continues today in the work of such people like author Deepak Chopra, NBA basketball coach Phil Jackson and celebrity media mogul and TV host Oprah Winfrey. As he notes in his preface, this book is "a guide especially for those who are curious about the origins of the current boom in spirituality and who seek a sympathetic depiction of its many expressions" (2012: xiii). *Restless Souls* attempts to not only explain the beginnings of the Spiritual Left, but also seeks to give validation to those leftist spiritual seekers and activists today that seek an alternative to the view points of the conservative Religious Right. Much like scholar Catherine Albanese, Schmidt in this book wants to clearly prove that liberal American spirituality has had a long and distinguished history and its traditions are much more than just shallow, ready-made beliefs and practices without any substance as many have accused it of. He states in his first chapter that "religious liberalism presents a self-critical tradition still very much worth contemplating and engaging" (2012: 23).

The book itself is a chronological sketch of liberal American spirituality that is covered in 6 chapters starting with "the Transcendentalists in the 1830s and 1840s, their radical heirs of the 1850s to 1880s, the realizing agents of

liberalism's universal vision between 1890 and 1910, and the seekers who brought to fruition the emergent spirituality after 1910" (2012: 14) Schmidt purposely does not set criteria on what he believes or doesn't believe spirituality to be, but it is evident that he focuses on those American spiritual traditions that have tended to avoid traditional religious institutions and authority. According to Schmidt, the chronicles of this brand of American spirituality in this book aimed to show "a highly productive alliance among liberals, progressives, and spiritual seekers that has long been evident in American culture". He goes on to say that he counts himself "among those Americans who would like to see such associations remain vital in order to provide an essential counterpoint to all the values talk of the Religious Right." (2012: xii) He wants to defend liberal American spirituality from its critics who say its superficial and narcissistic by showing that it has made a substantial and meaningful contribution to the American Religious Imagination. Although it is important to note that rather providing just a defense of liberal spirituality, Schmidt reminds the reader that, first and foremost, he wants to present his work as "primarily a work of cultural history". (2012: xii)

As a work of cultural history, it is presented quite effectively in an accessible manner for both academics and laypeople alike. Schmidt does do a nice job of illustrating his arguments academically by his extensive use of biographical information from many different sources, including many original 19th century journals. While it might seem a challenge to connect all these distinct and particular spiritual movements that take place over a 100 year span, Schmidt does so quite well by bringing together the institutional and literary ties that bonded each of these movements. For example, most if not all of the movements that came after the Transcendentalists, such as the Quakers and the Theosophists, all shared a love and familiarity for the work of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman as well as Swedenborg, and philosophies such as Vedanta, Buddhism, and Mysticism. There are tensions between each of these spiritual movements in this brand of American Spirituality, but their uniqueness was as much a focal point as the common ground they shared. This individuality as much as what they had in common was what kept movements like these socially engaged with one another.

Although this book is well argued, nicely organized, and presented in an accessible manner, especially considering the amount thinkers and periods it addresses, Schmidt's work does lack in a few areas. While Schmidt does talk about how many of these thinkers advocated for social change and progressive social measures, he doesn't really give many if any concrete examples at all of when and how this social change exactly happened. When talking about the social activism that was championed by Quaker activists Rufus Jones and Thomas Kelly, Schmidt doesn't elaborate on the how they pragmatically used their spiritual beliefs to achieve the progressive social goals they were after. Its also important to remember that almost all of the people who are addressed in this cultural history from 1830 to 1940 with the exception of W. E. B. Debois were all of a white, upper-class, educated background. These people unfortunately at times did little to try to connect with the poor, with the workers, and with

African-Americans although they of course spoke on their behalf. A little more could have been written on this to shed some light on the issue.

All criticisms aside, Leigh Schmidt has a complex yet palpable study on how the Spiritual Left came to be and how it is relevant even now. Considering the political, social, and religious climate in the world today, studies such as these are very important and are needed more than ever. Although, as stated in the previous paragraph, can these studies and the ideas presented in them really connect with those who might need them or benefit from them most. Will the Religious Right heed these messages or just pass them along as they always have. This of course would leave those who need social and political progress the most in the same position that they have always been in.