

Book Review

Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2003): 309 pp..

The author is the director of the Boise Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. He is a self-described non-religious (though ethnically Jewish) observer of American religious life. The central thesis of this book “is that religion in the United States is being transformed in radically new directions” (4). Wolfe also wants to allay the fears of some who believe that fanaticism among religious Americans threatens the principles of modern liberal democracy. According to Wolfe, liberals should not worry at the rise of religious expression in America, since “We are all mainstream now” (4). By this he means that religious Americans (i.e., primarily those who claim to be Christians) are, in the end, little different in their values and lifestyle than non-religious Americans.

Wolfe traces his thesis in eight chapters, each devoted to one aspect of American religious life: worship, fellowship, doctrine, tradition, morality, sin, witness, and identity.

In his discussion of worship, the author notes the movement in both Protestant and Catholic circles away from formalism and reverence in worship toward individualism and narcissism. Wolfe calls attention to the shift toward contemporary worship music over “imposing and distant” classical sacred music (33) and the doctrinal minimalism of power-point sermons in church-growth oriented congregations. He notes that liberals who fear the rise of strong religious belief in America “should not be fooled by evangelicalism’s rapid growth” (36). Religion, he adds, like “Television, publishing, political campaigning, education, self-help-advice—all increasingly tell Americans what they already want to hear” (36).

In the chapter on fellowship, Wolfe notes that Americans are suspicious of institutions. He observes that more than ever they are prone to “switch” their religious loyalties, and “the decline of denominationalism is real” (43). According to Wolfe, “Denominations offer a sense of belonging in the same way the American Association of Retired Persons and the National Association of Railroad Passengers do; one joins them in only the most passive, coupon-clipping sorts of ways” (49). He concludes this section by stating, “Like other aspects of religious practice in America, the inward looking quality once associated with strong versions of faith has been transformed by the individualism and hedonism of American culture” (66).

Moving on to doctrine, Wolfe describes what he calls “the strange disappearance of doctrine from conservative Protestantism” (67). American fundamentalists no longer care about dogma but about pragmatism. If fundamentalists are weak in this area, we can just imagine the assessment given to evangelicals: “By playing down doctrine in favor of feelings, evangelicalism far exceeds fundamentalism in its appeal to Christians impatient with disputation and argument” (74).

In his discussion of tradition, Wolfe begins by noting that the United States is “a decidedly non-traditional society” (97). He points to Jews, Protestant Christians, and Catholics who are prone to transform religious traditions. He notes that our country currently “has conservatives aplenty, but it lacks traditionalists” (126). He thus argues that it is incorrect to assume that the recent American tilt to the right politically will result in the conservation of tradition in American culture, since, “the overwhelming majority of believers do not view their faith as requiring them to be against change” (126).

In the area of morality, Wolfe begins with the illustration of the Southern Baptist revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message* to reflect a more conservative view on gender roles. He argues that despite the emphasis on “submission” even among conservative Christians the language of women’s “empowerment” carries more cache: “conservative women are not especially submissive at home” (132). Wolfe sees Mormonism as an exception to the rule in its ability to create in its adherents “a personal morality that stands in sharp contrast to the immorality of the world” (143). His final conclusion is that religious faith in America is generally not strong enough and strict enough to win moral obedience in its adherents.

When it comes to sin, Wolfe traces what he calls “the religious origins of non-judgmentalism” (165). In accessing “growth-oriented and spirit-filled churches” he notes that they “not only dispense with doctrine, denomination, and theology, they also want to avoid any actions that will make people feel that their faults have taken on cosmic significance” (166). Included here is Wolfe’s observations of Saddleback pastor Rick Warren, who, he says, “does not come close to even mentioning hell” (166). He does, however, note that most Southern Baptist churches “tend to be places that have not caught up yet with the therapeutic individualism and egalitarian inclusion so prevalent in the rest of America” (167). The avowed secular author ends this chapter with a surprising observation: “But somehow I am not pleased with this retreat from sin, for the ease with which American religious believers adopt non-judgmental language and psychological understanding is detrimental to anyone, religious or not, who believes that individuals should judge their actions against the highest possible ideals of human conduct, however those ideals are established” (184).

In his discussion of witness, Wolfe examines the evangelization efforts of evangelical Christians. While noting a zeal for evangelism, he also observes that “evangelicals often discover that their attempts to share their joy turn out to be more complicated than they may at first have realized” (187). Modern evangelicals “do not want to stand out as unpleasant and ill-mannered,” and this tempers their zeal (187). To overcome this, Wolfe says that evangelicals have made “a Faustian pact” with the culture (205). Though long preaching separation from popular culture, they now seek to use it to promote their ends.

Finally, turning to identity, Wolfe hones in on the impact of immigration and the American tendency toward religious “switching.” He discusses here the tendency of Korean-Americans to embrace conservative Protestantism and of Muslim Americans to accommodate their religious practices to American culture. America remains a nation that values choice.

In the concluding chapter, Wolfe asks, “Is democracy safe from religion?” (245 ff.). After his survey of American religious life, Wolfe responds that liberals in the post 9-11 world have little to fear from radicalism from religious Americans. He argues that so-called conservative Christians are not “sectarian” (256). We are “a religious people, but we are not a zealous one” (254). He notes that Americans are likely “to avoid faiths that ask them to take doctrine seriously” (246). He points out again the doctrinal anemia of modern Christianity noting that “in religion, whatever the Lord requires, knowledge of his teaching is not among them” (247). Far from separating from the popular culture, modern Christians “tend to jump on whatever cultural fad happens to be preoccupying secular people in their society” (250).

In retrospect, Wolfe’s book is an immensely helpful analysis of American religious life and evangelical Christianity. Questions might be raised about his methodological lumping of all “faiths” together in this study (Protestants, Catholics, Mormons, Jews, Muslims) and not distinguishing their differences. He also fails to acknowledge the fact that freedom for religious pluralism is a result of a society influenced by Protestant Christianity. No such freedom exists in Muslim countries, for example. Its most valuable contribution for evangelical Christian is its sobering analysis of our cultural compromise.

We must admit that this outsider has hit the nail on the head. Our churches are doctrinally thin to the point of being ephemeral. Our naïve attempts to embrace popular culture in evangelism have been a deal with the devil, and we are on the losing end. How striking that an outsider must tell us that we no longer define and preach against sin! Wolfe also reminds us that in the current cultural milieu churches which place a high value on doctrine will not have mass appeal. We should not expect it.

The one paragraph from Wolfe that shouts like a prophetic jeremiad to the church of today is this one from the conclusion:

Growth is the enemy of sectarianism. Religions committed to the principle that the world is irredeemably corrupt and the sin of human beings [is] deeply etched may be content to watch their membership numbers stagnate as they gather into sects, but just about all other religions in America want to be attractive to the uncommitted and to retain the already committed. This adherence to growth can have its frustrations; watching sermons reduced to PowerPoint presentations or listening to one easily forgettable praise song after another makes one long for an evangelical willing to stand up, Luther-like, and proclaim his opposition to the latest survey of evangelical taste. Tacky as evangelicalism can be, however, sectarian it is not. Its problem, in fact, is the opposite—so strong a desire to copy the culture of hotel chains and popular music that it loses what religious distinctiveness it once had (256-57).

May we ponder this outsider’s call and stand “Luther-like” against the tide of compromise.

Jeffrey T. Riddle, Charlottesville, Virginia