God *in* Gotham? Really?

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The generous, warm-hearted comments about *God in Gotham* from Wallace Best, Deborah Dash Moore, and Thomas Tweed, plus John McGreevy's introduction, do, indeed, please its author. I am relieved that no one said I should have remained a colonialist or that the book merely replicates what others have said. But the writing of history never ends, and their comments open fascinating avenues for deeper explorations of religion in the seemingly inhospitable atmosphere of modern urban life. If *God in Gotham* is succeeded by multiple new books and articles that turn its arguments and conclusions in different and even opposite directions, hallelujah! History moves on. Our books are just markers along the way.

Not surprisingly, the comments uncover fascinating evidence I missed and raise subjects that *God in Gotham* skipped. Consider Deborah Dash Moore's suggestion about rethinking the art of Florine Stettheimer and rereading work by Charles Reznikoff and Alfred Kazin. Kazin's remembrance of a synagogue visit with his father, from his *Walker in the City*, lost out in the book's final editing—one example too many. But a deeper study could have probed Kazin's sentimentality about immigrant community but silence about the immigrant community's religious elements. Reznikoff I still do not know. But imagine the interpretative possibilities inherent in reexamining Stettheimer's four 1930s *Cathedral* paintings, "secular shrines" that depicted Broadway, Fifth Avenue, Wall Street, and art. What should Stettheimer's pointed use of religious terminology for secular Manhattan features tell us about her understanding of religion? What would her viewers think? What of Moore's suggestion to treat Stettheimer's multi-sexual Manhattan salon as a "religious validation of personhood"? If an unexpectedly common ethos emerged from Stettheimer's salon, Jewish chevras, and black and white Protestant storefront churches and hotel rooms, would this suggest that non-religious elements shaped religious expression or that religious elements quietly haunted the seemingly non-religious?

And how could I have missed Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s 1970 "Black Power in the Church," so pointedly raised by Wallace Best? It appeared in 1970, the same year that Judy Blume published her controversial bestselling teen fiction, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, with which *God in Gotham* opens. Powell and Blume constitute the proverbial odd couple evidencing religion's persistence in the city. Blume's newly suburbanized Margaret faced classmates whose parents sought to replicate Manhattan's active urban religious upbringing in the suburbs, although her own parents offered a painful exception. Powell's revolutionary Christ would not merely live in the city but in black Harlem, highlighting the outrage of northern Jim Crow segregation for Manhattan's white Christians and Jews who sustained it.

The Powell and Blume references raise crucial questions about religion's relationship to city politics and bigotry that *God in Gotham* could have tackled more vigorously. In fact, the original outline for *God in Gotham* proposed chapters on both politics and religious bigotry. The book does trace the vital connection between religion and politics in

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the careers of both Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and his father, A. C. Powell. But a chapter would have probed the deep and sometimes conflicting political engagements of black and white Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and sectarians, religion at the forefront of many, if not all, their efforts.

A chapter on religious bigotry would have more fully explored the post-1945 familial tensions over "mixed marriages" at the heart of Blume's novel. Blume's Margaret only launched a pre-teen search for faith in her new suburb because her parents ditched religion after her grandparents rejected their mixed marriage, leaving Margaret religiously rootless among classmates who "belonged." The chapter could have probed this more deeply but gone on to discuss urban (largely Protestant) anti-Catholicism as well as the late 1930s Catholic antisemitic "Christian Front" associated with Father Charles Coughlin—its sentiments, mixed with anti-black racism, further unspooled critically in Harry Sylvester's 1957 novel *Moon Gaffney*.[56]

The chapters fell before two concerns. They would have moved *God in Gotham* too close to a broad, yet still incomplete, narrative history of religion in Manhattan, which the book was not meant to be, and they would have taken too long to research and write. *God in Gotham* does probe race bigotry in Manhattan religion. But deeper, broader histories could flesh out religion's vivid relationships to modern Manhattan politics—plus bigotry lodged in faith, perhaps contesting *God in Gotham*'s admittedly rather benign portrait of Manhattan's functional religious tolerance.

Like Best and Moore, Tweed also introduces Manhattan possibilities I did not know. I missed D. T. Suzuki's 1952 visiting professorship at Columbia and his engagements with Manhattan's artistic and intellectual communities. It is not surprising that Suzuki had more than peripheral contact with Paul Tillich before, during, and after Suzuki's Columbia professorship, since Tillich's reach beyond Christianity had long produced questions about his orthodoxy. But what about the intellectual outreach of Niebuhr and Heschel, or even Soloveitchik and Day if not Norman Vincent Peale? For example, *God in Gotham* notes the uncanny parallels between significant features of Joseph Dov Soloveitchik's views and those of W. E. B. Du Bois, Horace Kallen, and the historian Perry Miller about Jewish and black "double consciousness," modern cultural pluralism, and Jewish and Puritan covenanted communities. Are these just remarkable coincidences or did Soloveitchik read far beyond the traditional Talmudic sources with which he is commonly credited?

Tweed raises a direct challenge about theory. Would not *God in Gotham* have been more insightful if it had directly engaged specific theoretical constructs of religion and modernity? Having just watched Fran Lebowitz's Netflix series *Pretend It's a City*, perhaps I should have engaged her as a theoretician of modernity. True, I cannot think of a single episode in which a religious question emerged. But that might be the point. She offers an acerbic comic's evocation of the secularization thesis. Religion has so faded in the modern city it is not even worth a joke.

God in Gotham's introduction does contain a brief introduction to different theories of religion, from simple denominational identity to Paul Tillich's "ground of being" to William James's famous notion, outlined in his 1902 *Varieties of Religious Experience*, that religion involves "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their

[56]I did not know Harry Sylvester's *Moon Gaffney* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1947) until Philip Jenkins cited it in his review of *God in Gotham,* "When Religion Thrived in New York," *Christian Century*, Nov. 18, 2020.

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solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."[57]

Although I did not always understand everything that the late religion scholar Jonathan Z. Smith wrote, I have always appreciated what he said about defining religion, which I happily quoted in my introduction. Smith commented on the conundrum seemingly created by James Leuba's 1912 *Psychological Study of Religion*, which found at least fifty different ways to define religion. But as Smith pithily observed, "The moral of Leuba is not that religion cannot be defined, but that it can be defined, with greater or lesser success, more than fifty ways."[58]

In the early stages of writing *God in Gotham*, I thrashed about developing a substantial section on defining religion (as well as modernity). But the deeper I descended into Gothamites' understandings of religion and the multiple ways they practiced them, my draft on theories of religion (and modernity) got shorter and shorter. Maybe most of this stemmed from the fact that I simply am a historian who studies contingent pasts that shift and twist as circumstances change. But as Manhattan example piled on top of Manhattan example, I also realized I was not a religious studies scholar given to untangling abstract notions about religion. Rather than commit to a particular definition of religion, I copped out, writing perhaps all too genially that *God in Gotham* would probe "the ways that millions of Gothamites understood religion and practiced it from the Gilded Age to the Kennedy election." In short, I threw the definition to my subjects. But what is that?

I will let others answer that question. In the meantime, I can only say that amidst the relief that the book is done and gone, I had enormous fun working on it. How could I not? It satisfied a Minnesota farm town kid's fascination with Manhattan implanted during a 1958 senior class trip, honored my deep friendship with the late Eric Monkkonen, UCLA's distinguished urban historian and my classmate in the University of Minnesota's American history PhD program, and offered a provisional answer to my students, who often asked: How did we get from the Scopes Trial to Jerry Falwell if religion died amidst urban modernity, as Max Weber believed he was witnessing? And I got all this with Manhattan.

I hope others will tackle modern Manhattan religion. There is so much more to say, and they will have enormous fun saying it. If their God in Gotham is different than mine, hats off to the histories we write.

[57]William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), 31.

[58]Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269–284, quotation on 281.

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