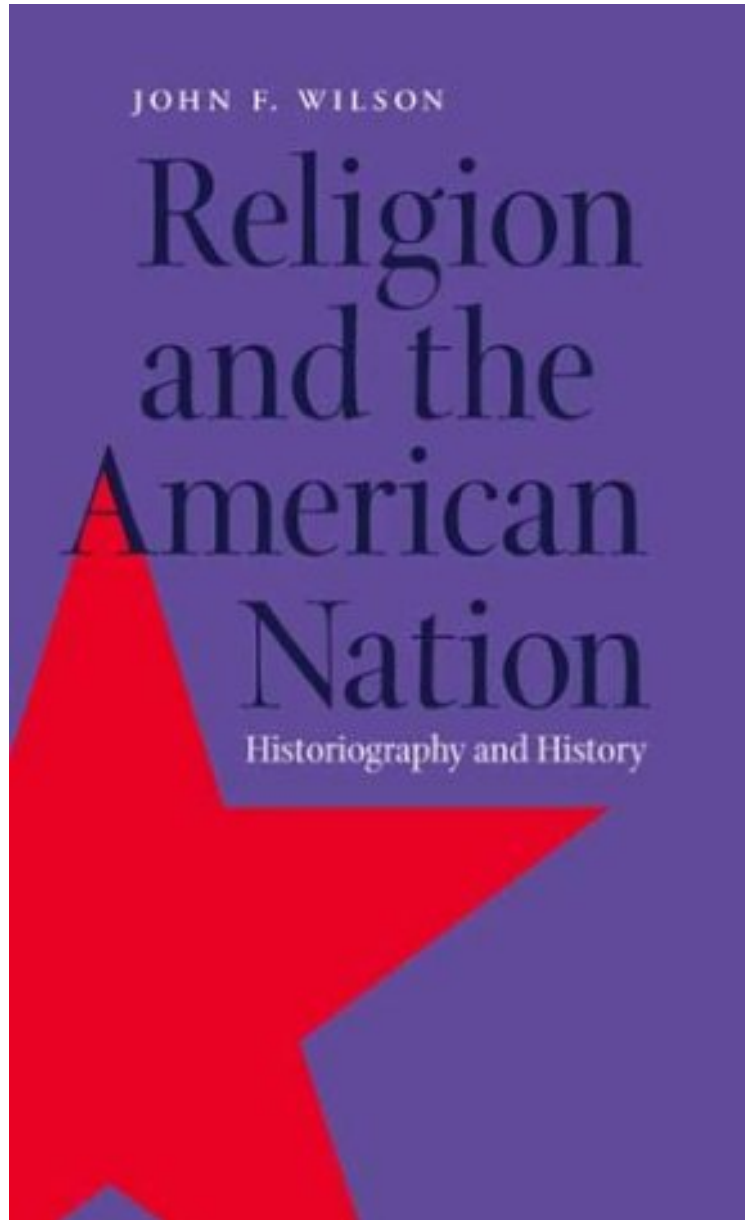


[Download] Religion and the American Nation: Historiography and History

## Religion and the American Nation: Historiography and History

*John Wilson*

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#2992964 in Books 2003-06 2003-06-23Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.00 x .61 x 5.00l, .59 #File Name: 082032289X120 pages | File size: 54.Mb

**John Wilson : Religion and the American Nation: Historiography and History** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Religion and the American Nation: Historiography and History:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. What's Been Said about the History of Religion in AmericaBy Frank

BellizziMatt Tippens wrote the first and only review of this book so far, and it's a really nice piece of work. So I hesitated to throw in my two cents worth, but then changed my mind. Because it's one of the few sweeping historiographies of American religion to be published by an expert in recent times, this is clearly an important book. It likely deserves more attention than it has gotten. In his "Introduction," John F. Wilson says that because American exceptionalism has been related to religion (he cites Sidney Mead as an example of what he's describing) the subject of this book is even more significant. He goes on to give an overview of this three lectures, which make up the rest of the book. The primary subject, says Wilson, is "the historiography of religion in the United States" (3). Lecture One provides a survey up to the 1970s. Wilson acknowledges that because it tries to account for so much, it necessarily leaves out several worthy figures. In this lecture, one of his main points is that the term "Puritan" could stand to be redefined and rehabilitated so as to serve as a useful, not-so-anxious expression. Lecture Two is about more-recent attempts by historians to get past or to overturn the dominance of Puritanism in American religious historiography. Such attempts fall into two difference categories: (a) the position that says a variety of narratives, and not just the Puritan one, truly represent American religious history, and (b) the position that says historians can use social-science approaches in order to get at the paradigms and mechanisms of religion in America. Lecture Three then explores "the religiously generative dimension of the American society" (5). If I have a complaint about this book, it would be that it left me wanting a lot more. Part of that is just the nature of Wilson attempting to tackle this subject in three lectures. The other part of this frustration has to do, in my opinion, with Wilson neglecting certain historians and their work, while giving attention to others that are less deserving. For example, he mentions that P. G. Mode assumed Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis." But he doesn't say anything more about Turner. He also mentions that W. W. Sweet assumed the same (15-16). But, again, we hear nothing about Turner. If he's so seminal, why not more information about him, at least in the notes? On the other hand, I wondered about Wilson's inclusion of Harold Bloom's book and ideas in the third and final chapter. Bloom certainly is an interesting guy. But I thought that when he proclaimed himself a gnostic and basically said that most all other Americans are gnostics too, well, that was just sort of bizarre. But this is mostly nit-picking on my part. The fact is, there aren't many people who can equal John Wilson in what they know about the historiography of American religion. This book introduces and sorts through the material about as well as it can be done, I suspect. For that reason, it is an important resource for graduate students and for non-specialists who'd like to quickly get up-to-speed on the topic.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Provides Readers With a Foot-In-The-Door to Religious Historiography  
By Matt Tippens  
John Frederick Wilson's "Religion and the American Nation" provides a good starting point for the study of American religious history. Essentially a historiographical overview of major developments and themes in the field of American religion, the book gives the reader a brief summary of what Wilson believes are the major figures and works in the discipline. Wilson, over three chapters, traces religious history from the major early works in the field up to the present day. In the process, he offers an explanation as to what have been successful approaches to the subject and also where approaches have missed their marks. In addition, Wilson recommends other areas for research that have yet to be completed. In Wilson's first chapter, subtitled "The Long Shadow of the Puritans," he explains that the first serious writing about the role of religion in America began in the nineteenth century. Early writing on American religion dealt heavily with theology and not so much with its history. Wilson builds to a discussion of what he considers the model of narrative history of religion in America - Sydney Ahlstrom's *A Religious History of the American People*. Containing 63 chapters and totaling 1,160 pages, it placed religious history into larger narratives of cultural, political, social, and finally, American history. Wilson claims that Ahlstrom's work both exemplifies and closes an era of narrative accounts of religion in American history. For a student of religious history, this should probably be one of the first sources to consult. Wilson ends the chapter by trying to explain why the Puritans have such a prominent place in American religious history: 1) the movement served as a point of departure for British civilization and its religious components in the New World, 2) it reflected the hegemonic role of British-Protestant culture, and 3) Puritanism displayed how religion has functioned in American history. The second chapter explores the religious historiography since Ahlstrom, primarily the period since 1970. This period, Wilson remarks, is characterized by studies of a variety of religions and paradigms for studying them. For someone wanting to do more work in religious history, this is the most useful chapter because it introduces new approaches and disciplines that Wilson believes are beneficial to the study of American religious history. In these works, multiple narratives replace the master narrative and it also includes religious studies performed by social scientists. An example is Ahlstrom's student, Peter Williams, who used the social sciences to improve Ahlstrom's massive study. Wilson also introduces the revitalization movement, a model for a kind of social interaction, where one group is challenged or adversely impacted by another group. Wilson uses this movement to recommend that more comparative studies on religion be done. The chapter encourages readers to think "outside the box" when it comes to writing about religion. The final chapter is subtitled "From Civil Religion to Milling at the Mall." Here, Wilson places Marcus Lee Hansen's *The Atlantic Migration*, a volume that stresses how the Puritans were models for succeeding groups of immigrants to follow as the key to their success. Will Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* concluded that post-World War II America was a religiously pluralistic society and introduced the concept of "religious brands." The American nation itself also became an object for religious affections.

Wilson notes the work of Robert Bellah, who discusses the semi-divine status of American leaders and sacred sites, such as the Alamo and Bunker Hill. Harold Bloom's studies find the American religion is a form of "democratic Gnosticism." Wilson concludes by commenting on the idea of "milling at the mall," his theory that the mall, the place to be seen and see others, is like religion, in that, people can engage in common acts. The final chapter gives the reader a sense of how, even today, religion continues to play a prominent role in American society. What "Religion and the American Nation" lacks is detail. A short text, one does not get a full sense of the scope of religious history in the United States. The historiography of a particular religious group is not covered in any depth, in fact, there is little in depth coverage of historiographical themes or movements. There are probably only twenty-five to thirty total works mentioned in the entire book. Wilson fails at trying to even come close to a comprehensive examination of the religious historiography of the United States. That being said, if one were looking for a brief introduction to religious historiography, Wilson's work lays down a solid base, preparing a student for a more in depth analysis of religious historiography. The reader gains a sense for the evolution of religious historiography, its shift from theology to narrative to multiple narratives and the inclusion of the social sciences. Also, a reader would get a feel for the prominence of American religion and how it just cannot seem to escape "the long shadow of the Puritans." Readers get a sense of the prominent historians and major works. "Religion and the American Nation" provides its readers with a foot-in-the-door to religious historiography.

This lively survey ranges across several centuries of change in the ways historians have thought and written about religion in America. In particular, John F. Wilson is concerned with how historians have perceived religion's relationship to the political organization of our country. He begins by establishing the genesis of religion as a specialized area of American history in the nineteenth century, and then discusses religious history's development through the early 1970s. Along the way he considers topics ranging from the "long shadow" the Puritans have cast over our comprehension of religion in American history to the ascendancy of such institutions as the University of Chicago as systematizing forces in religious scholarship. Wilson then discusses how scholars, since the early 1970s, have sought to ground their accounts of American religious trends and events in ways that either avoid or transcend references to Puritanism. The rise of comparative religious histories, Wilson notes, has been the welcome outcome. Moving into the present, Wilson explores a range of behaviors, if not beliefs, that might be understood as religious aspects of American life, and looks at how the spiritual or religious dimensions of American cultural life have been expressed in gnosticism, the mass media, and consumerism. One commentator, Wilson notes, suggested that there are no longer any religions as such in America today, but only religious "brands." Wilson himself sees America as a place where there is room for Old World traditions and new spiritual initiatives, a modern nation remarkably hospitable to ancient preoccupations.

Well-written and informative. (Virginia Quarterly) For scholars new to the field, it is a crib sheet that concisely, accessibly explains the conversation they are joining in medias res. For others, it provides a larger framework within which to locate the more focused studies they are engaged in reading and writing about. (H-AmRel) This slender volume is indispensable reading for graduate seminars in American religion . . . Students will be greatly assisted by Wilson's expert tour of historiography. (Religious Studies) About the Author John F. Wilson is Collord Professor of Religion and has been dean of the Graduate School at Princeton University. His books include "Pulpit in Parliament" and "Public Religion in American Culture."