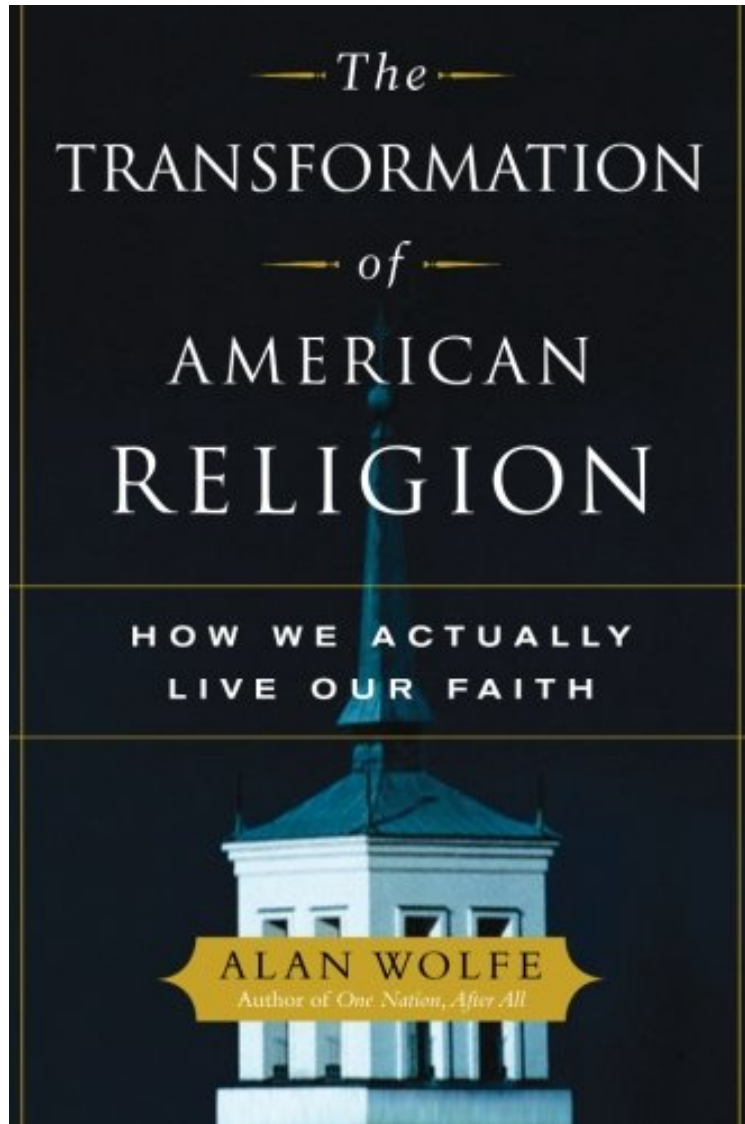


(Read ebook) The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith

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Alan Wolfe

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Alan Wolfe : The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. The American Faithful Lose Their FocusBy AJCThe Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith by Alan Wolfe is a fascinating study of how the faith of

Americans has changed and is practiced in this 21st century. It is an objective sociological study by a self-professed agnostic and non-practicing Jew. Wolfe is not hostile to religion and admits admiring those with a strong belief. It is always a plus to come across a readable academic study. Professor Wolfe shows how faithful Americans, in the Judeo-Christian sense, have gone from a God focused practice of faith to a faith where the focus is on self and God is a tool for a kind of sentimental self-defined morality. The writer also covers the faith experience of new immigrants to the United States and does reflect on Islam and new religions like Mormonism. He observes the struggle for orthodox Islam against "Americanization" of that faith. What comes across in this study is that how people label themselves is not necessarily the faith they practice. This is probably not news to the keen observer of the "churched" but the book does one a service in verifying what one observes in scientific terms. My only negative about this work is that the author overlooks those bastions of serious orthodox study and practice of Judaism, Catholic and Reformed theology. Dr. Wolfe tends to think orthodox belief will be all but gone in a few years. I disagree, and believe this is where the future of Judaism and Christianity can be found. Overall I recommend this work for any serious student of religion in America.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Religious Culture Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes By Akachei In 2005, Christian Smith coined the term "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" to describe the beliefs of most American teenagers: exceedingly vague, it's a belief system more about providing therapeutic benefits to its adherents than matching any sort of doctrine. This wouldn't be a surprise to anyone who read (in 2003, when it was published) Alan Wolfe's "The Transformation of American Religion", which points out that this is extremely common among the religious of all ages, largely an effect of religious institutions' adaption to modern America and their almost capitalistic efforts to attract adherents. "Transformation" covers more broad ground than doctrine, however - the book handles several aspects of religion in turn. This leads to some repetitiveness, given the shared source of many of the changes, but each aspect has its own details. I worried a bit about Wolfe hitting every nail of the changes with his individualism hammer, but he picks out the different strains on occasion and the sourcing never really strains. Still, the book can actually get more interesting when it switches to a sub-topic, like smaller groups (Mormons, Buddhists) and immigrants where the central theme has more complicated results. Said theme being that churches - to stay alive and attract people - increasingly draw from individualism and pop culture, from the surge of some conservative denominations (such as Pentecostalism), to the weakening of doctrine and denominational differences even in more formal churches, to the very modernistic mega-churches, to a number of other issues. Wolfe leans very heavily on interviews and ethnographers, but while I would have liked more statistical grounding, there's enough here to stop it from falling apart. The only prose problem was he occasionally slips into writing from the perspective of the people he's talking about, which can be disorienting. His approach runs into trouble in the last chapter, though, where he misapplies the non-denominationalism into politics. Evangelicals may not have that much fixed doctrine, but they can be relied on to vote a certain way. Further, he misunderstands the anti-democratic nature of the courts blocking some religious populism as a bug, when it's a feature; they're a necessary check on populist approaches. This isn't to say there's not a complicated issue over the intersection of religion and politics; just that he fails to approach it correctly. "The Transformation of American Religion" could have used a little rebalancing of content, but is recommended for a look at the cultural background of current religion; just don't expect anything useful about the political side of things from it.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. "And counting . . ." By Stephen A. Haines Scholars debate the number of "Christian" sects scattered across the planet. Wolfe doesn't attempt a count for the United States. Rightly so, the situation in that country is far too dynamic to pin down securely. If his chronicle is any indication, there may be more sub-forms of "Christianity" within those borders than can be found around the entire globe. Wolfe's travels and interviews are assembled here in a lively and descriptive account of why "Christianity" in the US precludes either definition or classification. It is, in many ways a ground-breaking and interesting book. It's certainly a stimulating read. Just keeping track of the breakaways and schisms, local or regional, is a mind-bending exercise. If the US prides itself on anything, it is the theme of "individuality". As a politically democratic heritage has demonstrated, ideals and beliefs there are too fluid for dogmas to take root effectively. In religious matters, although these are rarely studied in detail, the passion for individual decision-making is intense. Wolfe, who visited and interviewed countless ministers and adherents of various faiths, demonstrates that personal choice has both been expressed and addressed in highly varied ways. His account is as detached as possible, since value judgements on his part would be meaningless. A circumstance, he grants, that is partly due to his Jewish Hungarian background. Whatever his method was - and only one group demanded that he declare himself - it shows here as impersonal and highly effective. Given the broad sweep he had to make, gathering in Protestants of many stripes, Roman Catholics, Jews and Muslims, he's produced both a detailed and comprehensive account. By the time you've finished this book, you find that few, if any, of the interviewees duplicated the words of any other. Individualism, indeed! Wolfe opens the book with what many still believe is fundamental to "faith" - humans are depraved and only the "believers" can count on some form of redemption. In short, people are divided into those who are "saved" and everybody else. The "state of grace" endorsed by the early Puritans, was believed to have set some people apart. Wolfe argues that this separation is no longer valid - if it ever was - and that there are too many forms of "faith" accepted by too many people to sustain the idea of separation. In order to learn this, Wolfe surveyed the "fundamentalists", "evangelicals", "mainline" and "megachurch"

leaders and members to obtain their views. He sat in churches, meeting halls, homes and any place where the faithful might gather. He also dealt with those few who remain apart from "organised religions" and spoke directly to their particular deity. He deals with such questions as "fellowship", "sin", dogmas - which label(s?) "doctrine" and "morality". All these "scare quotes" are needed because, again, similarity of views is lacking. If nothing else has been shed in religion in the US, it is any form of absolutism. Among the many changes that have transformed US religions practices, the application of market forces is looming ever larger. Tom Lehrer once sang "You really gotta sell the product" ** to church leaders seeking new members and retaining old ones. Christian church leaders have taken this advice to heart. Selling "faith" has led to adoption of a wide variety of techniques, from the "rock mass" to putting the crucifix behind the altar in storage in the church basement. On the one hand, this has had effective results. Many people have become "switchers", often more than once, jumping from one faith to another seamlessly. If a church - even the building itself - the officials, the rules or doctrines, others in the group, fail to appeal, the communicant simply goes elsewhere. Scandals within churches, raising the issues of what is "morality" and who's qualified to pronounce on it, may scatter members. On the other hand, it may bring people together to resolve an issue to their satisfaction, apart from whatever senior members of a hierarchy might decree. Some people in the US have viewed recent ties between religion and politics with fear and distrust. Others, of course, applaud it. To those doubtful, Wolfe counsels patience and understanding. There are simply too many versions of religion in his country to ever seriously threaten the political structure of the US. Any government showing favouritism to any given sect[s] will be vigorously opposed by all the rest. Since each has its own version of what "religion" is all about, commonality of views sufficiently bound to overthrow the tradition of "separation of church and state" is doomed to failure. Since the diversity of opinion about relationship with the various deities is so great, a similar spectrum typifies views about politics. There is no foundation for categorisation in either realm. As Wolfe points out, "Christianity" has been "Americanised" making it too diffused for common ideas, beliefs or actions. That may give comfort to some, or distress to others. It is, however, the reality of the situation. [stephen a. haines - Ottawa, Canada]** "Vatican Rag" - 1965

American religionlike talk of Godis omnipresent. Popular culture is awash in religious messages, from the singing cucumbers and tomatoes of the animated VeggieTales series to the bestselling "Left Behind" books to the multiplex sensation The Passion of the Christ. In The Transformation of American Religion, sociologist Alan Wolfe argues that the popularity of these cartoons, books, and movies is proof that religion has become increasingly mainstream. In fact, Wolfe argues, American culture has come to dominate American religion to such a point that, as Wolfe writes, "We are all mainstream now." The Transformation of American Religion represents the first systematic effort in more than fifty years to bring together a wide body of literature about worship, fellowship, doctrine, tradition, identity, and sin to examine how Americans actually live their faith. Emphasizing personal stories, Wolfe takes readers to religious services across the nation-an Episcopal congregation in Massachusetts, a Catholic Mass in a suburb of Detroit, an Orthodox Jewish temple in Boston-to show that the stereotype of religion as a fire-and-brimstone affair is obsolete. Gone is the language of sin and damnation, and forgotten are the clear delineations between denominations; they have been replaced with a friendly God and a trend towards sampling new creeds and doctrines. Overall, Wolfe reveals American religion as less radical, less contentious, and less dangerous than it is generally perceived to be.

From Publishers WeeklyWe have come to the end of American religion as we once knew it, proclaims sociologist Wolfe. Drawing on interviews with practicing Protestants, Catholics and Jews, Wolfe examines the ways that American religion has been so transformed over the past five decades that it is no longer recognizable. He explores every facet of American religion-worship, fellowship, doctrine, tradition, morality, sin, witness and identity-as he investigates the fading of practices or beliefs that once dominated. For example, he observes that discussion of doctrine has almost disappeared from churches as they have focused more and more on emotional response to worship or belief and less on intellectual investigations of a church's history or creed. Wolfe also points out that the increasing religious pluralism in America has altered not only the faiths traditionally practiced in America but also those of immigrants who bring their religions with them from their native countries. Over the past 40 years, Wolfe argues, American religion has become "more personalized and individualistic, less doctrinal and devotional, more practical and purposeful." Although Wolfe's study offers some lively reporting and clear prose, it provides little new information about the decline of American religion and the newly altered religious landscape. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. From BooklistThe egalitarian individualism that sociologist Wolfe has previously taken as his interpretive key for understanding American morality (Moral Freedom, 2001) now guides him in an exploration of contemporary American religion. In a wide-ranging survey, Wolfe finds that an indulgent individualism is radically redefining religion, undermining churches' ecclesiastical integrity. Though American pews are full, many of the worshippers now pray to a deity placidly tolerant of personal preference and lifestyle convenience. Though most advanced among liberal Protestants, this astonishing erosion of traditional orthodoxy increasingly manifests itself among Catholics and Evangelicals. (Even Old Order Amish are losing their grip on inherited beliefs.) Wolfe

acknowledges and scrutinizes strategies for resistance among Orthodox Jews, southern Baptists, and Mormons, but he doubts that such strategies will prevent the eventual disappearance of religion as a cultural force. Skeptics may complain that in treating all of America's diverse religions, Wolfe oversimplifies the trend he analyzes. But in his concluding call for renewed dialogue about the role of religion in democracy, Wolfe gives readers good reason to appreciate his perspective on our still-evolving national worship. Bryce ChristensenCopyright American Library Association. All rights reserved "While others look at American religion and see a two-party system pitting conservatives against liberals, Mr. Wolfe sees a wide swath of theological moderates. . . .The measured tone that Mr. Wolfe strikes in this important book will be welcomed by many readers. So should his call for full citizenship for religious Americans."