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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ RELIGION

The Right to Believe: Religion and the Rise of Relativism

Thomas F. Powell
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"From 'I think, therefore I am,' we have reached 'I feel, therefore I am right," Thomas F. Powell writes.

This interdisciplinary essay traces the lineage of a hybridized Christian capitalism to its current incarnation, which embraces magical thinking and individually repackages the entitlist spirit of Manifest Destiny. Professor Powell, formerly on the history faculties of SUNY-Oswego, Syracuse University, University of Akron, and the University of Wurzburg in Germany, states that religion shapes culture in the United States. It imbues the prevailing discourse with self-congratulatory truthiness, while doctrine evolves into a feel-good, consumer-oriented version of flexible Christianity. Science cannot be trusted, because feeling and intuition are supreme to the modern pragmatists: the next wave of Romantics.

Social Darwinism melds with Protestant Arminianism to produce the message that God shows favor to the deserving faithful in the form of wealth. Those in society who fail to thrive deserve little pity, as their reduced condition itself is evidence enough that God isn't impressed with their efforts. The countless ways that economic opportunities and life chances are determined by circumstances of birth, large organizations, and public institutions are de-emphasized, and the existence of circular logic goes unmentioned. Christian denominations have couched absolutes in an embrace of Relativism, in order to oppose Science and maintain relevance in a business-dominated landscape of excess labor capacity.

The essayist shows signs of a sense of humor; exhibit A is one of the most heartfelt disclaimers out there: "I believe that any errors in this book should be blamed on others, who may be unregenerate or outright degenerate." The argument flies without a bibliography across several streams of Philosophy, bringing in major players like pragmatists William James and John Dewey, utilitarian John Stuart Mill, David Hume, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and the old brimstone man Jonathan Edwards. This material has great utility for graduate students and academics and is certainly recommended. However, some sentences seem engineered to shake off mere casual pursuers, cracking back on themselves, like: "True science turned out to be dogma only as dogmatic anti-dogmatism…"

More than forty years ago Bob Dylan's generational anthem "Like A Rolling Stone" highlighted the question which Science can't counter, "How does it *feel*?" That question is once again gaining primacy in the minds of Americans. There is nothing a rationalist can do to convince a relativist that facts are the supreme yardstick of validity. A fervent enough wish reinforces itself and takes on enough substance to govern action. Religious belief is spilling over into secular public policy, so underlying facts or lack thereof are becoming a real concern. *The Right to Believe* accurately chronicles the flowering of the now-dominant irrational ideation, but does so with more erudite sophistication than might appeal to the popular masses.
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