

**Edwin Scott Gaustad**

# A Religious History of America



**NEW REVISED EDITION**

A RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF AMERICA  
New Revised Edition

EDWIN SCOTT GAUSTAD



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*For Susan, Scott, and Peggy — as before.  
But now also, for Mimi, Layna, and Evan;  
for Stuart and Liliana.*

# Preface

The first version of this book was published almost a quarter of a century ago. So much has happened to American religion (and to the historiography of American religion) since that time that it was more appropriate to thoroughly rework the book than merely to revise it. Accordingly, a great deal of new material has been incorporated, and not just in connection with events of the last twenty-five years.

Other significant changes have likewise been introduced. Instead of setting block quotations off by themselves, the words of the actual participants in the making of America's religious history have been woven into the text. Less interrupting to the eye, this helps the story itself to unfold more smoothly. Furthermore, a chronological frame is pursued throughout, rather than resorting in Parts Four and Five to a largely topical principle of organization. While a history is never without its themes, those themes now move in step with calendar and clock.

The basic purpose of the book, however, remains the same: namely, to portray the role of religion in all stages of this country's development—from the moment that America was only a gleam in the eye of an Italian sailor to the full-blown and often bewildering present. Religion was a powerful motive in exploration, a significant causal factor in much colonization, a partner in territorial expansion and national cohesion, both a critic and an ally in the transition to "empire," and, finally, a veritable whirlwind of energies and contrary forces in the latter half of the twentieth century. What religion will offer and what new forms it will take as the United States enters a new millennium is, of course, impossible to say. A careful study of the past will, however, make the novelties of the year 2000—whatever they may be—less intimidating, less confounding. As Mark Twain observed, even though history doesn't repeat itself, it does rhyme.

*Edwin Scott Gaustad*

Riverside, California  
Winter, 1989–90

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1. Early English settler, John White, portrayed the manner in which the East Coast Indians hollowed out a tree trunk in making a boat.

## Chapter 2

2. The maker of this fifteenth-century globe (Martin Behaim, 1492) clearly understood the world to be round; just as clearly, he understood Spain and India to be separated by only a few small islands.

## Chapter 3

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#### Chapter 18

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52. Roman Catholic Dorothy Day was an activist and humanitarian. This photo was taken in 1974.

#### Chapter 19

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57. A modern synagogue in Jamaica, New York, has the Star of David built into the ceiling design.

58. Russian Orthodoxy had its impact in the East as well as the West, as seen here in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1938.

59. A Zen Buddhist monitor here encourages proper posture and concentration.

60. William Jennings Bryan, three-time candidate for the U. S. presidency, won another kind of fame as the leading force against the teaching of evolution.

#### Chapter 20

61. Lyman Abbott, Congregationalist minister and influential editor, argued in behalf of evolution; he is shown here in a 1905 photograph.

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## Chapter 21

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74. Shown here is the modern interior of the chapel, Concordia Senior College.
75. Chief Justice Earl Warren administered the oath of office to the nation's first Roman Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, in 1961.
76. John Courtney Murray, S. J., was the architect of the Declaration on Religious Liberty adopted by Vatican II in 1965.

## Chapter 22

77. Shown here is the United States Supreme Court in the foreground, with the Library of Congress in the background.
78. Church of the Brethren conscientious objectors render alternative civilian service during World War II at Camp Stronach in Michigan.
79. Passions ran high in the Supreme Court rulings on prayer, as this 1963 cartoon by Herbert Block suggests.
80. Passions continued to run high for years after the United States Supreme Court heard its first "prayer case"; this Paul Conrad cartoon appeared in 1971.
81. Sixth graders in a Roman Catholic parochial school on Staten Island, New York, in the early 1960s.
82. A program of religious instruction was offered just off the campus of the public schools in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1964.

## Chapter 23

83. With respect to civil rights, both the nation and its churches turned a corner in the 1960s. This march on Selma, Alabama, in 1965 brought together priests, rabbis, nuns, and ministers in their support of Martin Luther King, Jr.
84. In a unique meeting Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X greeted each other in Washington, D. C., in 1964. A potential coalition became impossible when Malcolm X was assassinated a year later, with King's assassination following three years after that.
85. Father Ksistaki-Poka, the first Blackfoot Indian to be ordained as a Roman Catholic priest, blesses his fellow tribesmen.
86. Amid much controversy and some schism, the Episcopal church in the 1970s began ordaining women to the priesthood; here three such recently ordained priests join in celebrating the Lord's Supper (or Eucharist) in New York City in 1974.
87. In 1972 Reform Judaism ordained its first female rabbi: Sally Priesand, standing in the center.
88. The official emblem of the National Council of Churches was adopted five years after the creation of this ecumenical body.
89. One symbol of ecumenicity, the annual Alfred E. Smith Dinner in New York City, brought these diverse figures together in 1968: Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey (Congregationalist), Archbishop Terence J. Cooke (Roman Catholic), President Lyndon B. Johnson (Disciples of Christ), and Richard M. Nixon (Quaker).

## Chapter 24

90. Father Charles Curran in a 1986 press conference defended his position as a professor of Moral Theology at Catholic University of America.
91. The Southern Baptist Convention gathered in Las Vegas in 1989 where, once again, the fundamentalist faction prevailed over the moderate group.
92. The Reverend Jerry Falwell addressed huge congregations in his Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia; his television audience was estimated to be as high as four million at the peak of popularity.
93. Pope John Paul II, the first Roman Catholic pontiff to visit the U. S. Capitol, is shown here with President Jimmy Carter in 1979.
94. The Reverend Pat Robertson filed his candidacy for the presidency in Columbia, South Carolina, in 1988.
95. The Reverend Jesse Jackson campaigned for the presidency, often from church pulpits, in 1988.
96. California's newest Buddhist temple, Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, was formally inaugurated in November, 1988, with the hosting of the first World Fellowship of Buddhists to be held in the West.
97. This lovely mosque in Plainfield, Indiana, serves as host to the Muslim Student Association of the United States and Canada.

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# Part 1

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## AGE OF EXPLORATION



# New Worlds and Ancient Peoples

The "New World" was of course not new to those peoples who had inhabited it for tens of thousands of years before any Europeans arrived. Having crossed a no longer visible land or ice bridge from Asia to the Aleutian Islands, migrants settled in Alaska or, over a period of centuries, slowly spread to the east and south all across North America, then even farther south into Central and South America. Completing this slow but steady dispersal of population may have taken as long as twenty-five thousand years. Evidence for such an expansive migration comes through archaeological discoveries and surviving, widely scattered microcultures, these revealing that lands unknown to medieval Europeans already enjoyed much human habitation and high civilization.

Long before pharaohs sat on ancient Egyptian thrones, long before Moses led his people out of that Egypt, and long before Homer wrote *The Iliad* or Rome rose to mighty power, inhabitants of the Americas had hunted and fished, planted and reaped, loved and married, given birth and buried their dead. These inhabitants also ordered their lives in accordance with certain patterns of behavior and explained their existence and their universe in accordance with certain principles of understanding. They had, in other words, become religious.

The religion of these earliest Americans was as diverse as the times of their settlement, as varied as the tribal organizations themselves. If one is inclined to think of pluralism as a phenomenon of the twentieth century, it is important to recognize that the American continents were never so pluralistic as in the centuries before European discovery and exploration. Pluralism was reduced, not enhanced, by the "invasion of America." No single religious institution, no single sacred book, no unified priesthood or common creed can be found in the multicolored patterns of the lives of these ancient peoples. Yet, the effort should be made to understand something of their religious aspirations and activities.

Understanding does not come easily, since we do not have the kind of rich literary documentation upon which historians traditionally

depend. We must draw upon oral traditions and the archaeologist's trowel, upon the geologist's data for the Ice Age and the chemist's methods of dating, upon reading from the present back into the past, upon informed guesses and presumed universalities, and in later centuries upon the reports of missionaries and other observers. We cannot draw upon a common history, for no recorded history is shared between European Americans or Afro-Americans and these wanderers of old. We can, however, draw upon a common nature shared with these as with all peoples: common needs, common anxieties, common questions if not-quite-common answers. What is most required in our search of the past is the desire to understand.

— Misunderstanding came early in the application of the name *Indian*, since Christopher Columbus thought he had reached the outermost islands of India. Yet, in giving to these people an Asian origin, Columbus's misnomer was not hopelessly wrong. And some shorthand term is useful, just so long as it is not offensive and so long as it does not lull us into assuming a false unity. For never will we find that convenient construct called "the Indian," much less that abstraction designated as "Indian religion." When we use the shorthand, we are really referring to the Abnaki, Blackfeet, Crow, Delaware, Eskimo, Flathead, Ghost Dancers, Hopi, Iroquois—and so on through the rest of the alphabet. Each tribe had to come to terms with its own environment, whether of woodlands or plains, seashores or deserts. And each tribe had to find some terms to explain to themselves who and why they were.

Religious practices and religious stories played major roles in these accommodations and understandings. If rains were scarce and crucial to survival, then much religious ritual centered on urging or sacrificing or praying that rains might come. If the success of the hunt or the fertility of the soil were central to tribal life, then religion (along with sharp arrows and good seeds) was called upon to do its part. Just as environment dictated some of the differences, so the search for one's place in the universe could take many paths. The questions tended to be the same: Where did I (we) come from? Why must I (we) die? What is permitted (or forbidden) for me (us) to do? What separates us from, or unites us with, other peoples of other tribes or totems or lineages? What rules the sun, or the seasons, or even the affairs of the heart? And while the questions are widely shared, it is in the answers that one finds a rich diversity, a lively pluralism.

Cherokees of the Southeast regarded the earth as "a great island floating in a sea of water" and suspended at its four extremities "by a cord hanging down from the sky vault, which is of solid rock." Pimas in the Southwest saw the "Earth Magician" as the creative agent who shaped the world, "Round and smooth he molds it."