



***Review of Religion in America* by Lisa D. Pearce and Claire Chipman Gilliland, 2020**

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For those of us who teach undergraduates about the sociology of religion, we are always on the lookout for good course material that accurately represents some of the most complex concepts surrounding the conceptualization of religion but are not too dense that they are indecipherable to upperclassmen. *Religion in America* by Pearce and Gilliland manages this tightrope act with a great deal of skill and clarity. In doing so they produce a book that will be an invaluable companion to grateful professors all over the United States.

The introduction to the book should be required reading in any course that focuses on the sociology of religion just for its handling of how scholars define the concept of religion. Not only do Pearce and Gilliland bring a tremendous amount of nuance to the conversation, they also do a service to those of us who want to lead a classroom discussion about the various dimensions of religiosity by acknowledging the distinction between religion and religiousness. This is reinforced by the inclusion of Box 1 entitled, “Social Definitions of Religion” which contains direct quotations about defining religion from a number of eminent scholars in the field such as Marx, Durkheim, and Bellah.

The core of the book is a series of five chapters that focus on a different dimension of American religion with a particular emphasis on how demographic factors help to accelerate or diminish individual’s engagement with both religion and religiousness in the United States. One chapter tackles the delicate but important relationship between religion and race. What is especially welcome is that this chapter assesses both the present state of American religion, as well as spending some time describing how religious devotion has changed over time for several racial groups.

What stands out in these descriptive chapters is that they not only include sections about what is happening in American religion, but also explanations of why these shifts are occurring. The inclusion of these sections to the book are key because they encourage undergraduates reading the text to think deeply and critically about the myriad factors in society that can have an impact on religion, on both a personal

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and institutional level. They are written in such a way that provides a nice general framework to think about these issues while also nudging students to consider these questions for themselves; this will undoubtedly lead to lively classroom discussion.

In my estimation, this book works best when individual chapters are included in course readings. It appears that each chapter is only loosely related to other parts of the volume and thus there seems to be a lack of an overarching theme or narrative that ties the book together in a broad way. This is not necessarily a detriment, as oftentimes instructors are short on time during the semester and are not able to assign entire books but would rather quickly touch on a concept and then move on to other areas. This book is ideal for that use case.

This lack of a strong focus does not in any way diminish the contribution that Pearce and Gilliland have made to helping students understand the incredibly complex yet immensely satisfying work being done in the sociology of religion. In fact, this work may spur many eager undergraduates to pursue further study in the field.

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