

Review of *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition*. By Amy Kittelstrom.
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Amy Kittelstrom's *The Religion of Democracy* is a persuasive account about the religious tenor of American liberalism over the long nineteenth century, both Christian and post-Christian. Beginning with John Adams, she focuses her chapters on the key liberals whose personal and professional beliefs exemplify a sacred respect for the moral agency and virtuous potential of individual persons. Kittelstrom argues that their belief in individual reasoning and private judgment created the conditions for the rise of secular liberal culture. This faith in progress and politics ultimately blossomed into a "religion of democracy" by the turn of the twentieth century (12).

Despite her ostensible focus on figures like William James, one of Kittelstrom's strengths as an historian comes from her ability to place her chosen subjects in a larger history of ideas. Alert to the ever-present historical tensions between religious liberalism and competing doctrines, whether late eighteenth century Calvinism or late nineteenth century *laissez faire*, Kittelstrom sets James and others in dynamic cultural milieus where contested beliefs drive conflicts rippling out into wider publics. In the first half of the book, such detailed contexts help stage an evolving conversation across generations between liberals like Adams and Mary Moody Emerson, showing how they, and later William Ellery Channing, became leading voices of a Christian liberal tradition, both as public figures and as private counselors within an influential network of New England Christians.

Kittelstrom is particularly adept, for example, at placing Adams' legal and political beliefs in the context of what she calls the American Reformation, a movement of Christian thought that collectively argued for a Christian "liberty of conscience" anchored by "right reasoning" (29). This American Reformation ran parallel

to the rise of evangelical Christianity and its sentimental emphasis on a redemptive salvation founded on Jesus. By contrast, the American Reformation professed the “divine right of private judgment,” and promoted a set of attitudes valorizing humility, moderation, tolerance, and moral actions (8). In a principle that should sound familiar to readers of James, religious liberals contended that “right reasoning directed the Christian to consider the effects of a doctrine as indicative of its degree of validity” (30). Such values flourished among the Emerson family in the early republic, and in Channing’s Unitarian sermons in the 1830s. Much more than Emerson, in fact, Channing emerges as a key figure, particularly in relation to James. Kittelstrom points to scholars who have already noted an “incipient pragmatism” in his thought, and she follows such threads deeper into his writing (111). Her discussion about how a new “liberal media” diffused Channing’s articulation of the American Reformation beyond the church is particularly notable (129).

Readers of this journal will want to pay special attention to her chapter on William James, whom she calls “the most important philosopher in American history,” and who she places in the rough center, in narrative and temporal terms, of the seven liberals she examines (2). Although James marks the transition from Christian to secular liberalism, in Kittelstrom’s description of his thought in such works as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), we clearly hear the echoes of the Reformation Christianity preceding him. More pointedly, she turns to James’ essays like “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1899) to connect his pluralism, which respected “diverse viewpoints on reality,” with his emerging “religion of democracy” (158-9).

In an argument that becomes important to her discussion of the remaining liberals in her book, including Thomas Davidson, William Mackintire Salter, and Jane Addams, Kittelstrom writes that James’ profound attention to the “hidden chips of the divine” in every individual, regardless of cultural, racial, and gendered difference, bespoke a “crude but pathbreaking” belief that “more social progress is possible” in the search for diverse realities of

human difference (158). This possibility arises because the search for the truth of a multitude of realities, experiences, and perspectives was inextricably bound to a belief in universal equality. In an intellectual culture grappling with Darwin and Spencer, Kittelstrom contends that James now “fulfilled a role once reserved for ministers,” tying the major personal and professional milestones of his life to the fermenting social politics undergirding James’ ultimate belief in such social equality (192). She lingers on his speech on Memorial Day 1897, for example, which he delivered with Booker T. Washington at the dedication of monument to the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment, the most famous deployment of black soldiers during the Civil War. It was in this speech that James perhaps most forcefully articulated what Kittelstrom calls “the practical possibility of lived equality” symbolized by the regiment’s “cooperation across difference” (196). She connects this strain of James’ “Americanism” back to Adams, Emerson, and Channing by underlining his commitment to moral agency.

She also develops this idea forward in her chapter on Davidson, who sparked James’ belief in the religion of democracy through his assertion that liberty and equality be made “articles of faith” (218). The social history Kittelstrom recounts connecting James and Davidson together in upstate New York of the 1890’s could easily be expanded into a book itself. Her fascinating attention to Davidson’s even more direct engagement with the gender and labor injustices of the late nineteenth century is compelling, particularly his experiment with the Breadwinners’ College in the Lower East Side of New York. The increasing attention to issues such as urban poverty by liberals like Davidson drives the rest of the book, particularly the section on Salter’s “industrial ethics,” as well as the one on Addams’ social work with immigrants in Chicago during her years at the Hull House. Indeed, it is instructive that it was Addams’ faith in self-culture that harnessed her idea that “democracy believes that the man at the bottom may realize his aim only through an unfolding of his own being” (335). It was this “unfolding” of being, Kittelstrom contends, that liberals ultimately decided was the state’s

job to safeguard, and which the New Deal, by relieving individuals from the burdens of immediate want, helped to protect.

By asserting the profound role played by liberal intellectual elites like James in forging the tradition leading to the New Deal, Kittelstrom has not told a story meant to please every reader, especially those who claim radical social movements deserve more credit in the fight for equality from below, or those who might flinch at the individual prejudices held by the liberals in her book. Yet Kittelstrom has anticipated such criticism throughout her text, and, in noting any number of ironies along the way, she's succeeded in arguing, at a minimum, that the coalitions that built the New Deal, and even the "rights revolutions of the 1960s all the way to queerness," owe a significant debt to the religion of democracy and especially to those, like William James, who authored it.

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