

Notes on *Saving Faith: Making Religious Pluralism an American Value at the Dawn of the Secular Age*. By David Mislin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. 215 pp. \$45.00

Drawing largely upon primary and archival sources, Mislin examines the challenges faced by America's liberal Protestants from 1875 to 1925, when they felt their cultural influence threatened by profound economic, political, and intellectual change: the influx of Catholic and Jewish immigrants; the rise of scientific authority that fomented doubt and even agnosticism; and competing cultural institutions—labor unions, for example, and ethnic associations—that offered a sense of community and shared identity. Responding to these challenges of secularism and modernity, Mislin argues, progressive, educated Protestants chose to tamp down denominational rivalry and instead embrace religious diversity that included not only Catholicism and Judaism, but Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. Only by attesting to the social, intellectual, and personal value of religious life, they believed, could they insure that religion would not become irrelevant in the modern world.

Besides confronting the influence of other religions, liberal Protestants were faced with the thorny problem of faith in an age increasingly persuaded by scientific evidence. They were interested, therefore, in the work of three psychologists investigating spirituality and the mental processes involved in religious belief: William James, George Albert Coe, and Edwin Diller Starbuck. Starbuck had been James's student as a Harvard undergraduate and earned a doctorate in psychology at Clark University; his research for *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study for the Growth of Religious Consciousness* much intrigued James. Starbuck had based his study on responses to a questionnaire about religious practices that he circulated in the Harvard community, and he shared

his data with James for his Gifford Lectures and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Although neither Starbuck nor James is central to Mislin's study (both are dispatched in a few pages), Mislin notes that "The Will to Believe" and *The Varieties* underscored the Protestant argument that faith and doubt were not contradictory, and that religious belief did not require "absolute certainty in all matters of faith" (32). Mislin sees that James's "depiction of faith and unbelief in 'The Will to Believe' mirrored discussions taking place in Protestant churches. The denial of absolute certainty paralleled assertions made by many Protestants about the absence of finality in the quest for religious truth" (34). *The Varieties*, moreover, provided evidence of the rich diversity of spiritual life.

Mislin cites the World's Parliament of Religions, held in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, as an important event introducing Americans to alternative faiths. Despite liberal Protestants' purported celebration of other practices, the Parliament, Mislin sees, was infused by assumptions of Christian superiority; and despite liberal Protestants' professed embrace of the integrity of other religions, they were uncomfortable with the idea that the Parliament sent a message "that all religions were equally true and thus interchangeable" (43). Some Protestants, afraid that Christianity's uniqueness was being undermined, "sought to identify as many similarities as possible between Christianity and other traditions and then invoke the parallels as evidence for Christian superiority" (43). Other beliefs, therefore, would be respected, but Christian tenets and ideals would be seen as overarching.

This underlying conviction of Christian superiority was not surprising among liberal Protestants: they were, after all, members of social elites; their congregations were more likely to consist of professionals and business owners rather than immigrant laborers; and they failed to see how many members' condescension toward immigrants fueled their churches' reputation as inhospitable. They made a valiant effort to construct a vision of America as Judeo-Christian; since they were by nature social reformers, they strived to oppose anti-Semitism and racism, efforts, Mislin asserts, that did not

always “translate to an acceptance of divergent cultural practices” (159). Mislin addresses conflicts among Protestants, some of whom believed that liberals were diluting the meaning of Christianity, but the rise of evangelicals and fundamentalists as a counter force to liberal Protestants is beyond the scope of this book.

Although James plays only a small role in this book, Mislin’s first chapter, especially, focused on doubt, is useful in contextualizing the cultural moment — characterized by crises of faith and Protestants’ fear of the erosion of their authority — in which “The Will to Believe” and *The Varieties* appeared.

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