

Preface

This is a book about American religious traditions. Traditions are identifiable ways of expressing how human beings set about organizing their thoughts and actions about what it means to exist. Traditions include ideas, commitments, customs, manners, and celebrations of life in its complexity. Traditions help us to understand and to portray the inconsistencies and disharmonies of existence.

Although not all of our religious activity is confined to traditions, most of our festivals, private assumptions, and experiences take place in relationship to an existing tradition. The point is that religious traditions exist and those of us who study religious activity must know something about them. A tradition is never a closed system, but a collective memory—a way of perceiving existence. Perception includes perspectives (tendencies, attitudes) as well as actions that may be either conscious and deliberate or unpremeditated (often idiosyncratic). Even the most rational or pragmatic of us draws upon tradition to assist in the living of our days beyond the laboratory, the academic conference, or the marketplace. Each of us is expected to be a *mensch*, who must respond to failure and the need for love and care. Unless we allow ourselves to be reduced to what we know as researchers, executives, or attorneys, we realize that we exist in circumstances that are always more than what we know of them. To be at home with a spouse, three children, and a border collic requires an imaginative grasp of life that cannot be controlled by our individual genius.

Like life itself, traditions are both organism and artifact. *Artifacts* are the things we do and make, our contributions to the arts of discovery and problem-solving. *Organism* refers to the way life grows as the result of intentional thoughts and actions as well as serendipitous consequences quite beyond expectation. A tradition is never static. The traditionalist may hope to make it so, but both her motivations and the outcome of her efforts bear witness to the dynamic quality of tradition. It can never be “the same” because what we

ask of it and our implementation of its insights and practices will be shaped by a particular moment in the human journey.

Religion is often thought of as the sacred—the affirmation of an experience or commitment to an event, place, or person who becomes the center of existence. The sacred becomes a point of reference. The Fourth of July and what we now refer to as “9/11” are sacred moments in relation to which we Americans organize our sense of time and our programs of meaningful action. However, religion is not the sacred; rather it represents the way we hold the sacred in dynamic (dialectical) tension with the everydayness (what Martin Heidegger called the *Alltäglichkeit*) of existence. The sacred may inform and organize everydayness, but the quotidian can never be identified with it. Everydayness includes chaos, disorder, and disharmony. Religion provides the ideas and actions that enable us to maintain the significance of the sacred in circumstances that deny it. To use Mircea Eliade’s familiar terms, religion is the *dialectic* of the sacred and profane. If religion were limited to the sacred, it would be contrary to the manner in which human beings have expressed it throughout history. The evidence of history, in both past and present (social) contexts, suggests that religion is the way human beings petition and juggle the sacred in the profane world of pain, suffering, joy, depression, success, failure, and sheer invariability. Therefore, we may expect to observe religion anywhere, anytime.

In this book we shall concentrate on those religious traditions that have been important to the cultural shaping of the United States of America. There will be many religious phenomena not tended to in this volume. However, I will assume that those religious traditions discussed are a significant and continually present element in our religious life. Whatever else we may study, we should not ignore them because they are historical frames of religious reference. They contain the stories by means of which people maintain the dialectic of the sacred and the profane. The categories of religious expression referred to later in chapter 1 may be used to investigate ideas and practices that exist outside of and complementary to the traditions studied in this book. These categories form what may be called a method of study; however, they should not be construed as a methodology—a devotion to method that frequently leaves little room for alternative modes of reflection.

Finally, it must be said that any method used in the study of religion should lead us to learn something about what it means to be human. When, for example, we turn to the description of a religion like the Lutheran tradition, we should ask: What very human issues, such as those with which I myself must contend, are encountered in Lutheranism? What do I learn

about being human by struggling to understand this tradition? If I learn little or nothing, I probably have not really encountered the tradition, and my study is little more than the collation of information.

Obviously, this book need not be used exclusively according to its chapters—Tuesday: chapter 1; Thursday: chapter 2; etc. The students and the professor may decide to use themes or questions that require reading across chapters. They may ask, for example, what is the comparative value of the verbal expressions of all traditions directly related to the Reformation? Students are also encouraged to assemble a glossary of terms encountered in their reading. Do not rely on dictionary definitions, but instead fashion definitions from reading and understanding the terms as they appear in context.

My colleague, Moses N. Moore, has kept me grounded in historical particularity, with his careful study of uncharacteristic African American religion. My wife and colleague, Cynthia Carsten Wentz, has contributed her laudable critical skills and her study of Native American traditions. And, of course, the more recent works of Mark Noll, Jon Butler, Robert Orsi, David D. Hall, and Leigh Schmidt have helped to reorganize my thinking about the uncharacteristic nature of religion in America. Yet my long-standing interest in the Mercersburg Movement served as a basis for questioning consensual models of understanding. It remains impossible for me, however, to ignore the “lived religion” of the traditions, the denominations, and religious thought. Sooner or later, she who thinks about religion must find a story, a frame of reference, for her ideas. I have become fascinated by festivals and images. I have begun to think of our Lady of Guadalupe as “Mother of the Americas,” and she is present in a shrine in my backyard. But theology keeps me honest and remains an important element in my religious imagination and practice. And I think that the prevailing American religion that exists in complementary fashion to the traditions, and to civil religion, is no longer a *Protestant* ideology. As a lived religion it can be found among Roman Catholic, Jews, humanists, and, increasingly, Muslims.

This volume, which is the second edition of my earlier work, *Religion in the New World*, incorporates substantial revisions and updates in all chapters, particularly heavy reworking of material on the contemporary American religious scene, and the addition of a CD-ROM. The latter includes not only the full text of the book, chapter summaries, and reflection questions, but also links to a wealth of exciting and important web-based texts, graphics, and bibliographies. All of this, I hope, will deepen and enhance the student’s encounter with the living traditions of American religious life.