

## PREFACE

This book introduces the history of Christianity in America, particularly the United States. It is written for college and seminary students, book clubs, and individual readers—anyone taking a first step into this rich and rewarding field.

Exploring the history of Christianity in America is like visiting a national park. For the first-time visitor, it helps to have a map that shows the principal sites, roads, and hiking trails. Each of these trails leads to a different part of the park, and no single trail can traverse the whole. Even those who return again and again will have new things to discover each time.

The difference, of course, is that this history is not a place set apart. It is a story, or many stories, woven into the fabric of everyday life and into beliefs about the meaning of American history. Christianity has been a powerful influence shaping American history and culture. For

example, social reforms such as the abolition of slavery and civil rights drew inspiration from Christianity. And the Puritan vision of New England as a “City on a Hill”—the beacon to all the world of a fully reformed church and society—over time morphed into the belief that the United States has a special role to play in the world. One need not agree with this idea to see its importance for U.S. and world history, even today.

Back in the 1960s some experts predicted that the world would become more secular and religion would fade away. Just the opposite has happened. For better or worse, politicians are more alert than ever to religious concerns of voters. And even though the United States is religiously diverse, Christianity is still by any measure the dominant faith tradition. Some sectors of American Christianity are growing rapidly, especially evangelicalism and

Pentecostalism. Yet many Americans know little of the story of Christianity in the United States.

The history of Christianity in America is complex; no two historians would introduce it in quite the same way. New perspectives are always emerging. In recent decades, some scholars have even questioned whether or not there *is* a central story to be told. Who decides what the story line will be? Much depends on the historian's training and point of view. But in history just as in a national park, there are certain land forms—mountains and valleys—that command attention, even though they can be explored in many ways. A short list of such “land forms” includes Puritanism, slavery, the growth of Catholicism, and the rise of Pentecostalism.

The history of Christianity in the U.S. intertwines with broad themes in American history, but it also has its own specialized areas of study. Among the subfields informing this book are the stories of specific denominations (Baptist, Methodist, etc.), studies of revivalism and social reform, and biographies of individuals. Another angle of vision comes from sociological studies that explore the dynamics of democratization, voluntarism, and competition among religious groups. The relatively new field of women's history has helped the author to integrate the contributions of women into this text. Last but not least of the subfields is the history of theology, the doctrines or teachings that seek to express religious truth. Attempts to define, defend, or revise theology—or push it to the sidelines—are a very significant part of the history of Christianity in America.

Together with specialized works, broad and synthetic studies have contributed to the

*Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States*. Secular histories of the United States have been a constant aid, as well as a few classic surveys of Christianity in America. Of these, the magisterial work of Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, deserves special mention. That volume, published in 1972, ran to more than one thousand pages of first-rate historiography. But several decades later the fragmentation of the historical fields and the changing approaches to college and seminary education call for shorter, leaner texts to introduce fields of study.

The present volume intentionally uses a much shorter format than older surveys. When the *Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States* is used as a textbook, the instructor may wish to combine it with a more specialized work on American religion, giving students both an introduction and a focus area of the instructor's or students' choice. Used in this way, the *Introduction* is both an overview and a springboard for further study. Each chapter includes discussion questions for group or individual use.

This book owes a great deal to the work of other scholars. The author has made every attempt to credit her sources, both for the sake of academic honesty and to give interested readers specific leads on how to pursue their interests in the history of Christianity in America. Suggested readings are also provided as additional helps for the reader, along with a glossary and an index.

The author is grateful to all the scholars whose books and articles inform this work. Thanks are due to Dr. Erling Jorstad, who taught history and American Studies for many years at St. Olaf College, for reviewing the manuscript and suggesting ways to improve

it. Two colleagues at Augsburg College, Matt Maruggi and Bev Stratton, offered specific suggestions for revising the last chapter. Special thanks are due to Will Bergkamp of Fortress Press, for giving me the opportunity to update

and expand this book, and to Lisa Gruenisen and all those at Fortress whose expertise saw this work through its final stages. Last but not least, thanks are due to Craig Koester for his never-failing encouragement and support.