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Robert S. Ellwood. 1950: Crossroads of American Religious Life. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2000. Pp. xi + 244. No Price Listed.

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[1] In *1950: Crossroads of American Religious Life,* Robert S. Ellwood argues that 1950 was a year that "hung suspended between old and new, looking both ways without decision" (9). It was a "pivotal" year, as the *zeitgeist* of the country shifted from post-war optimism to Cold War pessimism. This change was visible in the political sphere - with the commencement of the Korean War and the rise of McCarthyism - as well as in religious communities, as they responded to changes in the broader culture.

[2] Ellwood's central theme is that in a crisis-ridden and anxiety-laden time, people sought stability and comfort in the religious life of the past. Ellwood writes that "by 1950 religion was raising up monuments to postwar prosperity as though the future were nothing but glowing, while in its spiritual life it paraded the past, using the latest technology to advance the doctrines of medieval monks and pioneer revivalists" (44). The inclination toward religious conservatism was tied up with the future - not only technologically, but also intellectually, as religious leaders drew on contemporary psychology and existentialist philosophy.

[3] The tension between the past and the future is only one of the tensions faced by religious adherents at mid-century. Another touchstone for understanding life in 1950 is the response to communism and the accompanying fear and anxiety that cut across religious traditions. The divide between communism and democracy was a pressing issue, an issue tied to the deeper divide between collectivism and individualism. This concern was woven throughout the culture, visible in the anti-communism of Joseph McCarthy, the concern about "mass society" in such sociological classics as William Whyte's *The Organization Man,* and in the reigning philosophical perspective of existentialism.

[4] Ellwood makes his argument first by sketching the historical context in the 1930s and 1940s that shaped the world of 1950, then turning to the prominent intellectual movements and political events that shaped religious life. He moves chapter by chapter through the primary religious traditions in the US at that time: mainline Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Evangelicalism, Judaism, and African-American religious traditions. Ellwood points out how religious communities responded to key external events, as well as how they influenced the broader society through their own action. For instance, the Korean War elicited a wide-ranging and dynamic response from religious communities. Ellwood elaborates the positions and the changes, such as the editorial stance of *The Christian Century,* which moved from initial support of the police action to later criticism of the US's focus on military force alone (161).

[5] Yet religious leaders were not simply a reactive group; Ellwood also outlines the formation of the National Council of Churches among mainline Protestants and the emergence of evangelicalism as a mass movement, visible particularly in the person of Billy Graham. Graham and other religious leaders are described throughout the volume, serving as figureheads of dominant religious perspectives, including Reinhold Niebuhr portraying mainline Protestantism and Fulton Sheen serving as a window into the popular Catholic mind.

[6] In addition to describing key religious leaders, Ellwood explicates developments and trends in American religious life by drawing on popular books, magazines, and religious journals to demonstrate the

point-of-view of people in religious communities in 1950, as well as by using historical sources to provide context.

[7] While Ellwood's approach enables him to explore the intersection of religion, culture, and politics in the US around 1950, he faces at least two important challenges to his analysis. First, while 1950 is the mid-point of the twentieth century and was a year during which many crucial events occurred, its selection as the focus of an entire book seems somewhat arbitrary. By focusing on just one year, Ellwood faces the difficulty of making the activities and developments of 1950 intelligible in a broader historical context, while at the same time maintaining his focus on 1950 itself.

[8] Second, his focus on leaders, prominent organizations, and popular literature elides the question of the relationship between the viewpoint articulated by leaders or written about in books and magazines and the actual understanding of individuals and groups of people who make up religious communities. How, for instance, did readers of popular religious novels understand the meaning and significance of those novels? Or, what is the relationship between the perspective of articles in the *Moody Monthly* and the perspective of lay evangelicals? Ellwood makes the assumption that the religious tenor of a time can be gleaned by looking primarily at leaders and organizations. While Ellwood provides an important glimpse into religious life in 1950, his method leaves a gap in understanding how religious communities were experienced by those who were not religious leaders.

[9] Moreover, by paying attention to the religious elites and "history-making" events, the everyday religious life of adherents is underplayed. For instance, African American religion receives the least attention among the religious traditions covered by a chapter, perhaps, as Ellwood writes, because 1950, "with its anticommunist anxiety, was not a banner year for race relations" (174). While briefly addressing key Supreme Court rulings, elaborating the problem of discrimination faced by African American people, and highlighting a few black theologians, Ellwood does not move far beyond the lack of progress in civil rights to examine how religious life was lived out by African Americans.

[10] In spite of these problems, *1950* is an important addition to the literature of American religious history. Ellwood does a very effective job of tying broader political and historical events to changes in religious understandings. He also ably covers a broad terrain, providing entree into the cultural, political, social, and religious worlds of the United States at mid-century, describing the way that 1950 was "defining and setting in motion forces that were to dominate much of the rest of the century" (23). *1950* is especially useful when read in conjunction with Ellwood's analyses of the following two decades in *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace* (Rutgers, 1997) and *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening* (Rutgers, 1994). Together they provide an important foundation for understanding what led up to today's religious landscape as we begin a new century.

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