
Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The New Religious Right: Piety, Patriotism, and Politics* by Walter H. Capps

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Indian learning with references to recent theorists, including Mohanty, Russell, Ryle, and Wittgenstein, it may have been wiser to choose just one conversation partner to invoke throughout.

Perhaps the philosophical audience must devote more of its time to Sanskrit learning—in translation, in the original—if it is to profit seriously from the distinctive and sophisticated Indian discourse on language and become able to engage Bilimoria in a truly comparative discussion of knowledge, truth, and language. The religious studies audience would have profited from more attention to the rest of the *Paribhāṣā*, particularly the application of the analysis of language to Advaita's reading of the upaniṣads. Or perhaps the solution is simpler: clearly *āpta* himself, Bilimoria may have to push his Indological learning still farther into the background, and state in his own reliable words a theory of language that is nevertheless deeply enriched by the ancient and contemporary wisdom on the topic.

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The New Religious Right: Piety, Patriotism, and Politics. By Walter H. Capps. University of South Carolina Press, 1990. 241 pages. \$27.95 cloth; \$12.95 paper.

Walter Capps has undertaken in this book the task of interpreting—not explaining—the New Religious Right. He offers us ample descriptive material about the various players in this complex movement and conceptual categories that help us to understand what they are up to and how their efforts fit into the larger American political and religious mosaic. While it is sympathetic and attempts to meet these people on their own terms, it is also evaluative, pointing to the ways in which their preachments simply will not do as a public philosophy for a diverse American culture.

The book begins with a series of what might be called interpretive experiments. Capps looks at various theoretical traditions in the study of religion and “tries them on” the phenomenon at hand. He is looking for the ways each conceptual scheme—from Durkheim and de Tocqueville and Geertz to Eliade and theories about social movements and awakenings—makes sense of what we have seen in the New Religious Right. But he is also looking for the ways in which the New Religious Right may expand the knowledge and categories given to us by those theories. Having mapped the theoretical landscape, he turns to a survey of the surrounding religious and cultural data that may assist in his task. He wonders what has been happening in America that may provide the backdrop, the conversation partners, and the enemies for a conservative religious movement. In this opening chapter Capps seeks primarily to convince us that this movement is both interesting and important.

What follows is a series of admittedly anecdotal portraits of the major figures that have defined the movement. In each scene, Capps is present as our

guide, telling us what he saw and felt, as well as what his protagonists said. In the chapter on Falwell, we have both an account of the man's public career and a down-home scene from Capps's Wednesday night visit to Thomas Road Baptist Church. All the ambiguities of the "Prophet" who is also a "Preacher" are there. The genius of the man is that he made it possible for a person to be a good conservative Christian and an effective political participant at the same time; but, according to Capps, he has been "only moderately successful in enacting the political and religious alliances he has striven for . . ." (56).

Capps next turns his attention to a figure less well known outside conservative circles: theologian Francis Schaeffer. It is Schaeffer's *A Christian Manifesto*, along with his nearly thirty other books, that has provided the intellectual homework for more visible movement personalities like Tim LaHaye. "[H]e was the one on whom they relied—and continue to rely—to be able to compete with rival theological stances on equal terms" (58). In the tradition of the Princeton theologians from Warfield to Machen, Schaeffer has provided the arguments about why Christianity is at complete odds with the humanist philosophies guiding most of American religion and culture.

In some ways, the choice of Bob Jones for inclusion in this book is an odd one. Bob Jones, Jr. once declared Jerry Falwell the most dangerous man in America because of his attempts to change a world Jones is convinced will always hate true Christians. Still, the Supreme Court ruling against BJU's racial policies thrust these reluctant players into the political arena. Both their arguments from scripture against the state and their angry declaration that believers are now a religious minority persecuted by the state remind us that not all conservative Christians are alike.

If Bob Jones is an odd inclusion, the Bakkers, on the other hand, seem obligatory. Ironically, however, what we learn about them does not appreciably advance the insights of the book. It is a delightful chapter to read—Capps has captured all the drama and pathos of the episode—but there is little here about the public agenda or philosophy of this branch of the movement. He has, however, ventured an interesting analogy between the *goals* of Heritage U.S.A. and the monastic communities of old—goals of spiritual contemplation and revitalization. That analogy lets Capps point to the particular tragedy of leaders who were guided by greed, lust, and hunger for power, rather than by monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

The last portrait is of the quintessential symbol of the movement, Pat Robertson. As with the other accounts, this is an admirable biography that helps us understand the political and religious impulses of the man. But it is with Robertson that Capps has the most trouble being sympathetic. "The truth is that the real Pat Robertson . . . is a sectarian Christian. The real Pat Robertson speaks in tongues and receives prophecies" (181). And his political ambitions are directed toward guiding the nation back to its Christian roots and its cosmic fulfillment as a nation where God's law is given dominion. Capps concludes by asking rhetorically, "Is such a vision good for a republic as it faces its future in a complex and volatile international community?" (184).

Obviously Capps's answer is "No." But he has been careful throughout to make clear that Robertson and others are welcome participants in the American political process, that their views can be legitimately expressed alongside contending views about America's purpose and identity. The common themes of the movement—especially its indictment of America's moral weakness and of the humanist philosophy seen as the cause of that weakness—provide a springboard for Capps's argument that what they have created is an "alternative civil religion." They have created an "Americanized version of the Christian faith as well as a Christianized version of the national creed" (195). But they have also, he claims, been a "revitalization movement." At a time of collective disintegration, they were an "attempt to breathe new life into traditional values while reestablishing a basis of national identity" (203). What Capps suggests, however, is that they could not be both. He faults the movement for being more interested "in revitalizing the life of the nation than in having an impact within the church . . ." (208). But then he declares as "misadventure" the attempt "to insert a salvation religion into the heart of government" (216). It is here that we may see this author's inability finally to grasp from the inside the mind of a movement that refuses to see "religion" and "politics" as separate categories. What he *is* able to grasp is that these people are needed as part of the continuing conversation about America's moral legitimacy, even if they are wrong.

This is a valuable book both for its "summing up" quality and for the new interpretive themes it sounds. Capps reminds us of why this movement was important, what it was about, and what lessons in democracy we might learn from it.

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The Sufi Path of Knowledge. By William C. Chittick. State University of New York Press, 1990. 478 pages. \$74.50 cloth; \$24.50 paper.

Whatever the meanings of "popular" and "elite" Islam, Ibn al-[◌]Arabi (d. 1240) and his thought have been a part of both. This great thirteenth-century theologian must be numbered among Islam's intellectual elite, and his ideas have certainly been popular and popularized, whether by his students and commentators, by poets—such as Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273), or by sovereigns—like the Mughul emperor Akhbar (d. 1605)—in their search for political and religious legitimation. But to gauge the size and force of Ibn al-[◌]Arabi's impact on Islam in its many dimensions, we need to have a firm grasp of his methods of approach and his system of thought. In short, we need a map of his universe.

Although there are a number of fine studies on specific ideas and works by Ibn al-[◌]Arabi, surveys of his thought have been incomplete due largely to the *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyah*, Ibn al-[◌]Arabi's *magnum opus*. This massive mystical com-