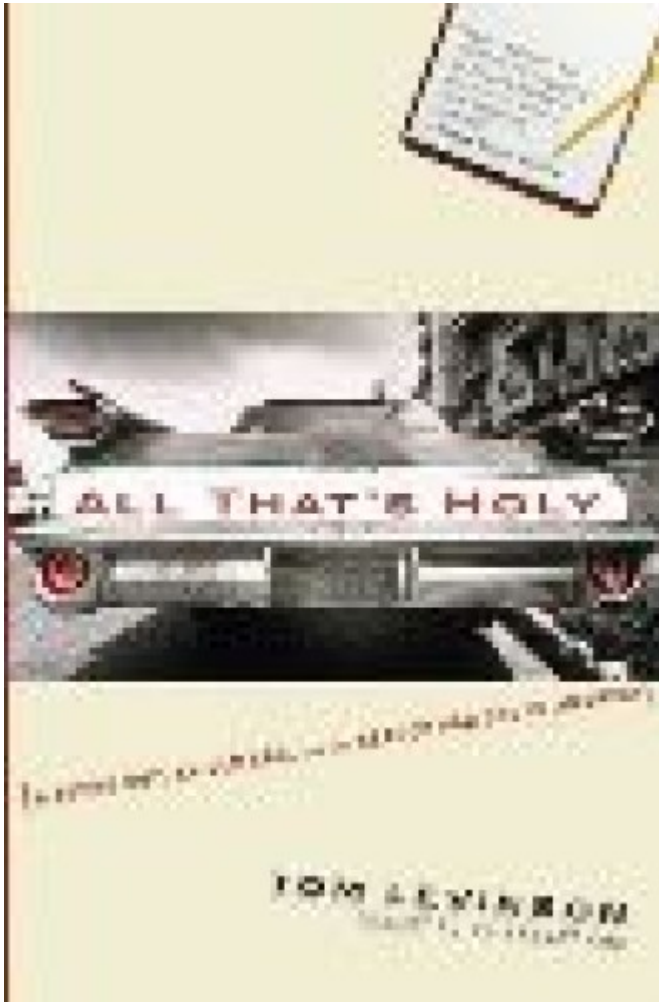


Holy highways

By [David Dragseth](#) in the [January 27, 2004](#) issue

In Review



All That's Holy: A Young Guy, an Old Car, and the Search for God in America

Tom Levinson
Jossey-Bass

Lamenting the free-spirited nature of Gen-Xers, a monastic friend of mine once told his abbot that the community might have to skip a generation in its search for new members. "This generation is all spirituality," he said, "but it just can't commit to the religious life." Hold on, Brother. I'm not sure if a New York Jew is what you had in mind for your monastic community, but if Tom Levinson is any indication of this generation's spiritual quest your lamentation might turn to rejoicing. Levinson does a lot of moving, and not all of it in his 1994 Nissan.

After graduating from Harvard Divinity School, where he received good theological training under the likes of Harvey Cox, Levinson decided to continue his search for God by exploring America's religious landscape. This book recounts his journey. Its jacket features a '50s vintage Pontiac and bills Levinson's journey as an odyssey of the spirit, a Jack Kerouac cruise across the geography of America's soul. He is billed as the hip, Gen-X de Tocqueville whose religious search takes him through the back roads and oral history of America.

But one should never judge a book by its marketing. Levinson's is less *On the Road* or *Democracy in America* and more St. Augustine's *Confessions*. God, too, is doing some searching—for Levinson. While the idea of an exposé of America's soul might make us pick up the book, the most intriguing journey here is Levinson's trip from spirituality consumer to religious life practitioner.

All That's Holy begins in Boston and ends in the Hasidic Borough Park in Brooklyn. This shift in geography tells a great deal about Levinson's conversion. But the point is not the destination but the journey, and because Levinson is such a good driver the trip converts both reader and author. Levinson has no agenda. No holy site of pilgrimage is his goal. He pursues holy conversation, and that, Levinson believes, can happen anywhere (hence the book's title). Levinson simply drives (and flies and walks) and allows dumb luck, fate or providence to guide him.

His first encounter with a Muslim store clerk outside Dayton, Ohio, happens because the exit ramp dumps Levinson in front of the store. Without the aid of Map-Quest, he meets homeless I Ching dice rollers, New Agers, Navajo medicine men, Jewish army chaplains, Dallas wiccans and Liberty University fundamentalists. He travels the country, back and forth and back again. Each conversation is a new story, and Levinson uses these stories as devotional aids.

The endeavor works because Levinson is a good listener. He is deeply earnest in an ironic Gen-X kind of way. Imagine a road trip with Studs Terkel and Bill Moyers and you will get something of the flavor of this book. It explores such themes as the struggle between religion and spirituality, the role of the individual and community, why choice seems so imprisoning, and why we can love some people only from a distance.

Levinson finds God all over the place. A systematic theologian or someone who prefers road trips planned by the AAA may find Levinson's journey a trip from hell. But if the structure of this pilgrimage is annoying, it is only as annoying—and as beautiful—as the American religious landscape itself. Any faith leader who knows his or her congregation will recognize the stories and personalities Levinson encounters. Levinson simply hands them back to us, helping us to hear and to learn from them and, ultimately, to have faith in them and in this country's wondrously perplexing way of holding all these experiences together.

Levinson is free-spirited enough to listen for the spirit. That's what makes this trip confessional. He teaches us to listen and to grow, as he does. The book's ending will make my monastic friend giddy. It ends where everyone from Moses to T. S. Elliot has taught us that all journeys end—at home. Speculative spirituality grows into religious practice, and a footloose generation decides to go traditional. Don't fret, Levinson reassures us, this generation and this country are on a spiritual road trip, but there is a homecoming.