

When religion thrived in New York

Jon Butler's dazzling study of faith and practice in a 20th-century metropolis

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [December 2, 2020](#) issue

In Review



God in Gotham

The Miracle of Religion in Modern Manhattan

By Jon Butler

Harvard University Press

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At first glance, the theme of religion in modern Manhattan might seem discouraging. Through much of the last century, evangelicals and conservative Christians were at best suspicious of the threats to faith and morality in the burgeoning metropolis, and some preachers denounced it savagely. Antiurban passions were acutely expressed in the temperance and Prohibition movements. But as Jon Butler demonstrates in his dazzling study of faith and its practice in the city between 1880 and 1960, religious life of all kinds was vibrantly alive in Sodom on the Hudson.

How could it have been otherwise? Gotham was a city of immigrants who found support and solace not in government but in popular institutions. Above all, that meant churches and synagogues. Populations that might not have been terribly religious in their home countries became legendarily pious in the New World. Religion became fundamental to identity and scarcely separable from culture and ethnicity. Urban Catholics never asked which section of the city a new acquaintance lived in; instead they inquired, "So, what's your parish?"

This is the metropolitan society that Butler portrays in such loving detail. He is especially good on how religion shaped the urban landscape. Building activity was intense throughout the period, and Butler has much to say about religion's encounter with art and architecture in this soaring capital of modernity and modernism. With all the new building and decoration, the opportunities for patronage and commissions were mouthwatering.

That boom produced some spectacular edifices that still dominate the streetscapes. Particularly for Catholics, those religious complexes also created a localized world of shrines, sanctuaries, and holy places that were fully visible and comprehensible only to the faithful. Churches sacralized the city. The city's complex and interlocking ritual calendars included fairs and festivals, processions and demonstrations. Religion was visible, unavoidable, and inevitable.

Butler is scrupulously fair in his coverage of the city's faith traditions, Jewish as well as Christian. He covers Black religion well in a substantial chapter called "Modernizing God in Jim Crow Manhattan." He shows how White Protestants remained a powerful force as Manhattan became a flourishing center for theology

and religious education. New York was the center of religious broadcasting as well as publishing, and it served as the organizational hub of many of the main denominations.

The diversity of the city exposed believers to unfamiliar interactions on a daily basis, demanding a rethinking of interfaith relations. In 1955, New Yorker Will Herberg published his classic analysis of America's new pluralist norm in *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. Such everyday encounters could be life-changing: just think of the impact that Harlem's Black churches had on Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the 1930s.

Against this New York background, Butler offers thoughtful accounts of many other innovators and opinion formers in 20th-century religious thought, including Paul Tillich, James Baldwin, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Fulton Sheen, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Norman Vincent Peale, Dorothy Day, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Jacques Maritain.

Butler's discussion of the quotidian realities of religion is equally valuable. He details the ways churches and synagogues organized themselves and used new technological opportunities to communicate to a wider world. Even something as seemingly basic as the coming of electric power transformed the life of the great urban churches, making them visible centers of progress. An innovative chapter called "Organizing God" shows how thoroughly the denominations borrowed the managerial and organizational techniques they observed in their commercial neighbors.

Butler's conclusion, "Moving Out, Moving On," describes the religious impact of the great shift to the suburbs from the 1950s onward. This chapter could easily have evolved to become a book in its own right. By this point, so convinced are we by the author's thesis about the power of metropolitan religion that we begin to wonder how faith could possibly stagger on in any other setting.

The book could hardly be more comprehensive than it is. Still, a few areas seemed to me to require more detailed treatment than Butler provides. Besides all the benevolent interfaith exchanges, he might have paid more attention to the tensions and animosities that quite regularly manifested between communities. To take one egregious example, Catholic anti-Semitism became a terrifying source of street violence and intimidation in the years around 1940, when Father Coughlin's militant followers formed the despicable Christian Front. For New York Jews, the Nazi menace

was not just something that loomed across the Atlantic. I would have found it hard to resist quoting Harry Sylvester's trenchant satire of the corruption and bigotry of New York clergy in his explosive 1947 novel *Moon Gaffney*.

Had space permitted, Butler might also have said more about the teeming variety of esoteric and occult sects and cult movements that abounded in the city. This theme appears in *God in Gotham* almost exclusively in the context of Black Americans, among what anthropologist Arthur Huff Fauset famously described in 1944 as the "Black gods of the metropolis." But White would-be gods, messiahs, and healers also proliferated in Gotham, as did their enthusiastic urban clients. In the wise words of a song from the New York musical *Sweet Charity*, "Brother, there's a million pigeons / Ready to be hooked on new religions."

It would be difficult to over-praise *God in Gotham*. Massively researched and lucidly written, it is a major contribution to modern American religious history. Filled with fascinating material, it cries out to be reread. Rather like exploring the streets of the city Butler describes, turning any page at random leads to some new and unsuspected treasure.