

## Guidelines for Book Reviews

*Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religion*

**Note: Please do not submit unsolicited book reviews. If you would like to review a book, please contact W. Michael Ashcraft. Thank you.**

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Book reviews for *Nova Religio* should do the following:

1. Describe the contents of the book (what the book is about, topics it covers, etc.)
2. Highlight important features of the book (contributors to the book, new perspectives, unique or distinctive insights, etc.)
3. List strengths and weaknesses (ranging from having an index, to neglecting key figures, to being unreadable, sloppy, or memorable).
4. Suggest potential readers (scholars, general readers, students, etc.).

Please type your reviews double-spaced, Times Roman 12 pt. type, unjustified, and be sure to head the review as follows:

*Title.* By Author. Publisher, Date. 000 pages. \$00.00 cloth; \$00.00 paper.

OR: *Title.* Edited by Author. Publisher, Date. xvi +000 pages. \$00.00 cloth.

OR: *Title.* By Author. Trans.by Translator. Publisher, Date. xx +000 pages. \$00.00 paper.

If you provide direct quotations, or cite the text, please include references in the following format (00); or, (000, n. 4); or, (00-00). Put your name and institutional affiliation at the end of the review: W. Michael Ashcraft, Truman State University

Reviews should be sent to W. Michael Ashcraft. Send to washcraf@truman.edu as an email attachment in either Word or Rich Text Format.

We encourage reviewers to limit their reviews to approximately 600 words. However, this is not a hard and fast rule. If you believe the book requires a longer treatment, please contact the Reviews Editor.

Thank you for your willingness to read and review books for *Nova Religio*. They are an important component of every issue (some would say the most important), and we appreciate the time you take to read the books and write reviews.

When your review is published, Michael will contact you by email.

Below, for your convenience as a first time reviewer for *Nova Religio*, are some reviews that have appeared in the past in the journal. These might be of some stylistic guidance to you in writing your review.

*The Church Universal and Triumphant: Elizabeth Clare Prophet's Apocalyptic Movement.* By Bradley C. Whitsel. Syracuse, 2003. 221 pages. \$39.95 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

Writing in a general interest context, Whitsel provides an overview of the Church Universal and Triumphant's history, parallels, and place in the American political-religious spectrum of twentieth-century new religions. Whitsel begins with a brief introduction of the 15 March 1990 prophecy, Mark Prophet's founding of Summit Lighthouse, the influence of I AM and Theosophy as the taproot for New Age religions, and Colin Campbell's notion of the "cultic milieu" as orienting points. As is typical of CUT scholarship, Whitsel notes that while it fits a New Age label, CUT disputes the association, and he instead points to a line of "Western alternative spirituality" (16) as a blanket category for many new religions.

Importantly, Whitsel writes, the development of an organizational survivalism that appeared following Mark Prophet's 1973 death and Elizabeth Clare Prophet's takeover marked the movement's separation from what it saw as a corrupt world nearing the apocalypse. Whitsel highlights this separatism in describing CUT's Cold War concerns of a one-government world and gives an understanding of how conspiracy theories combine with apocalyptic dualism in world-rejecting new religions, particularly by unpacking Campbell's cultic milieu concept. In fair detail, Whitsel explains the cultic milieu in a description that highlights its countercultural orientations and comes up with a simplified but attainable understanding of the concept.

Throughout, Whitsel contextualizes CUT in his various comparisons of it with other movements. He succinctly introduces the influence of various right wing groups; yet, Whitsel methodically avoids stereotyping by pointing out that CUT borrows from left and right and by differentiating CUT from movements like Peoples Temple and Aum Shinrikyo. According to Whitsel, following the Cold War, the movement became less separatist and began efforts to create a more marketable image for a New Age audience. Though some apocalypticism still characterizes CUT, Whitsel notes that when Elizabeth Prophet stepped down as leader in 1999, Gilbert Cleirbaut addressed CUT membership and "told the media that 'fanaticism' and 'living in fear' were chapters in the church's past" (150). Whitsel concludes by noting that CUT is currently in a period of metamorphosis during which splinter groups have and will likely continue to appear. Again referring to Campbell, Whitsel finds this "consistent with the malleable and unstable nature of the beliefs and organizational structures of esoteric movements" (156).

Overall, what make Whitsel's study valuable are general interest aspects of the subject, concise deployment of psychology, and interjection of some theory to illustrate what makes the movement noteworthy. Missing from Whitsel's treatment are thoroughgoing analyses, engaged incorporations of theory, and extended comparisons and contrasts. Also missing is a formal review of the literature. Instead, Whitsel prefers to sprinkle sources intermittently and list material in a 14-page bibliography. Still, he manages to present a fairly rich and consummately balanced portrait of CUT.

Frank Ferreri, University of South Florida

*The Martyrs of Columbine: Faith and the Politics of Tragedy.* By Justin Watson. Palgrave, 2002. 212 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

In the cultural rubble of post-September 11th America, it takes some effort to recall our recent ancient history when the media spectacle of mass murder in Oklahoma City and at Columbine High School was not yet part of business as usual. In both horrors, people were enfranchised as part of an imagined bereaved community that often seemed, perhaps, one of the only ways Americans could imagine themselves as one people, united in grief. And yet this unity was as illusory as the desire for purposeful community, as bitter conflict over root causes, legacies, meanings, and forecasts almost immediately became the order of the day. Such horrors rip people and communities apart as much, or more, than they bring them together.

Justin Watson's *The Martyrs of Columbine* offers readers a cogent, judicious, well-written analysis of the cultural alchemy through which mass murder becomes martyrdom, and a troubling case study about how "Columbine" became a cultural flash-card put to good strategic use by conservative evangelicals convinced that this bloodshed told us little about the easy availability of guns, or the attraction of a culture permeated by violent

imagery and expression. It told us, rather, about the nefarious forces of secularism that have led the country astray since the 1960s. (No mass murder, apparently, before this “Fall.” Descendants of victims of spectacle lynching, which many good church folk eagerly attended, would find this interesting, but never mind.)

Watson offers a brief introduction to the history of martyrdom in the Christian tradition, and how both the narratives of Cassie Bernall and Rachel Scott fit into this tradition, and what tensions remained to resolve, particularly the fact that the choice of sacrifice—so much a part of martyr narratives—did not seem to be an option, nor was there distinct ideological conflict involved, perhaps just cold-blooded murder.

Watson also offers a fine analysis of how these contemporary martyr narratives easily became a part of American folk evangelicalism, commodified by books, parents on lecture tours, memorial expression in cyber and physical space, religious and political rhetoric and material commemorative forms. “Columbine” symbolized many issues: school prayer, gun control, the mystery of evil (yet again), the culture of schools in America, the “evil” of secularism and the “need” to return to traditional religion.

In the book’s final chapter, Watson attempts to demythologize the narratives by offering a careful reading of evidence in order to deduce what “really” happened. As he points out, however, the compelling power of the martyr narratives will far outweigh skeptical interpretation, particularly among conservative evangelicals.

Edward T. Linenthal, University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh

*Learning Lessons from Waco: When the Parties Bring their Gods to the Negotiating Table.* By Jayne Seminare Docherty. Syracuse, 2001. xviii +351 pages. \$49.95 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

This book makes important contributions to the ongoing discussion of both the Waco incident and to the broader topic of the interaction between millennialist groups and their cultural opponents, particularly law enforcement. First, Docherty provides detailed analysis of the negotiations between the Branch Davidians and government agents, focusing on the period between 28 February 1993 and 15 March, at which point, she argues, negotiations effectively ended. Docherty’s perspective is informed both by her familiarity with the study of religion and by her extensive work in the emerging field of conflict analysis and resolution, and it is supplemented by interviews with several FBI agents who played important roles at the Mount Carmel Center.

In her analysis Docherty insists on a “symmetrical anthropology,” which gives equal attention to the worldviews of both the negotiators and of the Branch Davidians. She shows how each side constructed narratives of naming the conflict, assigning blame for it, and framing appropriate responses to it. When those narratives overlapped, there was substantial possibility of productive negotiation; when they didn’t, as was often the case, a stalemate ensued. She is especially effective in bringing to light the generally ignored worldview of the negotiators and emphasizing that it too had its symbolic elements and fundamental assumptions about human nature that led the agents “to shape the Waco negotiations into a process of ‘rational bargaining’” (155). The Branch Davidians’ commitment to other values, however, was neatly summarized by David Koresh’s caution that “I want to serve your laws where they coincide with God’s laws” (230). Docherty’s analysis of the negotiations is the best account so far of what worked, what didn’t, what might have been done differently, and why.

Her close reading of the negotiations leads Docherty to offer fourteen lessons that she hopes will have broader applicability, even though she acknowledges that her interlocutors within the FBI have rarely been persuaded by her arguments. The lessons center on the importance of recognizing the idiosyncratic worldviews that parties may bring to a conflict and adapting negotiating strategies to take account of them. Whether Docherty’s suggestions will make any impact on law enforcement negotiating practices remains to be seen, but they do offer scholars a useful and flexible set of concepts for the retrospective analysis of any future standoffs. *Learning Lessons from Waco* deserves a wide reading both for its subtle analysis of the negotiations and for its creative suggestions for improving the practice of negotiation with unconventional religious groups.

Eugene V. Gallagher, Connecticut College