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***The Devil is a Gentleman: Exploring America's Religious Fringe*, by J.C. Hallman. Random House, 2006. 352pp., hb. $25.95, ISBN-13: 9781400061723.**

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Popular, or "trade" books on new, alternative, or "fringe" religions are interesting by definition. That is because they usually fall squarely at the opposite ends of the spectrum of possible approaches: the books are either tirades against the danger of "cults" or hagiographies of charismatic figures. Somewhere in between are books like *The Devil Is a Gentleman* that falls in the murky waters of "general nonfiction."

Before going on to the content of the book, I'd like to present an imaginary scene from the world of book publishing: Imagine an eager writer meeting the commissioning editor of a major publishing house for lunch at a nice New York restaurant. They shake hands and sit down for some small talk while waiting for the food. The editor asks what the writer has been up to lately. The writer tells her that he's been visiting these small religious groups around the country for some time and recounts stories about tree-hugging druids, half-naked Satanists and drunken atheists. The editor nods her head, interested. The food arrives and she asks: "So what is your new book about?" The writer goes on to explain how he's found William James and how he really wants to set the record straight on his life; he wants to write a biography of one of the brightest minds of American intellectual life. The editor nods her head, clearly not so interested. The writer, blushing, goes on to say what a great book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* really is and how every American should know James's work better. The editor glances at her watch while munching pasta. The writer is panicking now. After a few minutes more, the editor asks: "Look, why don't you write about the religions you have been visiting. *That* sounds like an interesting book." The writer frowns. "Alright, why don't you write a book on James *and* the religious movements that you've been visiting?" the editor suggests. The writer thinks about it for a second, nods and they go on to enjoy a nice dessert.

Whether the above is anywhere close to how *The Devil Is a Gentleman* was conceived, it might as well be, because the book is not—despite the subtitle—really a book about new religious movements in America. Instead, it is a strange but fascinating mixture of religion journalism, William James biography, and soul searching. As such, it is a highly entertaining read, but also open to all kinds of criticism, only some of which I have space here to go into.

The book's eight main chapters deal with different religious (and non-religious) movements from all corners of the United States. The groups and traditions discussed include The Unarius Academy of Science, Druidism, The Christian Wrestling Federation, Satanism, Scientology, atheism, Wicca, and an "Orthodox Catholic" (281) group of monks and nuns renowned for breeding and training German shepherd dogs. In between these chapters the life of William James is followed in a chronological fashion. In this way the book tries to be something akin to a study of how new religiosity could be interpreted in the light of James's work.

The gap between James and the groups discussed is, however, never fully bridged. Although both the descriptions of the author's visits with the different movements and the biography of James are highly entertaining, no coherent framework for interpreting religious behaviour—and in this case unconventional religious behaviour—emerges. Firstly, while the author is mostly empathetic towards the groups he discusses, the book nevertheless becomes somewhat of a freak show with the tree-hugging druids, half-naked Satanists, and drunken atheists mentioned above. Although in many of the dialogues in the book the author conveys an air of impartial openness, there is an implicit framework through which the movements are seen and which leads the author to emphasize the strangeness of the beliefs and practices of the people interviewed and observed. While this is interesting primary material for scholars, the text does not rise above the level of journalism despite the author's attempts at scholarly—Jamesian—analysis. After all, the concept of pluralism that Hallman takes from James, is much more than just description—or even celebration—of diversity. Secondly, the passages the author quotes from James in order to interpret a particular belief or practice end up being not much more than sound bites. What little there is in the way of a conclusion is mainly concerned about James rather than the groups discussed. At the end of the day, "America's religious fringe" comes off as a lab rat for William James's theories of religion, but no cohesive interpretation of either is achieved. I guess that is the price you have to pay in order to reach a mainstream audience. A mainstream bestseller with graphs, tables and broad-

ranging theoretical discussions is a rare breed indeed and understandably so.

The author of *The Devil Is a Gentleman* is a writer first, a researcher and a scholar second. While I would not recommend the book as a serious study resource, there are a few things to be learned from an academic point of view. While serious scholarship always requires a certain amount of abstraction, that doesn't mean that academic prose has to be boring. The best of both worlds could be achieved if academics would at least aspire to write in the attention-grabbing and often dramatic style that Hallman has. There is a story in every academic article and book, many scholars just don't acknowledge that and consequently have little sense of a narrative that makes a good story. Now, if this sense of story could be conveyed to students, academics might also have a much better time reading end of term essays. It is in this sense, and simply as a document of one man's quest for meaning, that *The Devil Is a Gentleman* has value to the scholarly community.