

FORUM:
American Christianity and the Modern:
Ideas, Aesthetics, and Space
Editors' Introduction

THE four essays collected here originally were presented together in a session at the American Society of Church History annual Winter Meeting in New Orleans in January 2013. All address difficulties in defining “modernism” and all manipulate the category of “the modern” in reporting on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American religious history. Kathryn Lofton, first of all, observes that analytical binaries embedded in academic investigations of the modern shape interpretation by occluding the complexity of the processes of differentiation that occur continuously in culture. She cautions scholars of religion, especially, to be on their toes. She notes how researchers, exploiting a complicated critical literature about sacred and profane, can trade easily on the shortcuts it provides, in the process overlooking messy social and cultural interstices teeming with ambiguity. Lofton’s gaze upon the religious predicaments of fundamentalists and modernists is an altered one, where the intellectual pieties of Emile Durkheim and Jonathan Z. Smith are undercut by her visualizing the bones of a shared historical project. Both fundamentalists and modernists, she argues, imbibed the spirit of systematization, deployed method, and claimed coherency.

Elizabeth A. Clark braids the question of “what is modernism?” with the less-asked “when is modernism?” in scrutinizing the writings of the Catholic Modernist and Harvard professor George LaPiana. Clark explains that church historian LaPiana favored historical method over a theological approach to understanding the past, that he articulated to his students a dynamic theory of history, embraced Biblical criticism, and promoted a historiographic focus on the social character of early Christianity. Such standpoints were part of a broader modernism, but, as Clark shows, LaPiana’s thinking was complicated and cannot easily be fitted to the modernist type. In rejecting the modernist gravitation to “religious experience,” the legitimacy of grand narratives, and Harnack’s notion of an “essence” of Christianity, LaPiana was postmodern. Accordingly he impresses all at once as an innovator of an early postmodern stripe, a backward-looking salvager of tradition, and an intellectual paddling in the recognizable currents of Catholic Modernism. As such, the “when” of his Modernism is complex.

In her discussion of aestheticism in William James, Amanda Porterfield focuses on James's evocation of the feeling subject as both the locus of integrative mental activity and as an impediment to the resolution of experiences of contradiction and difference. The modernist aestheticism redolent in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is, for Porterfield, analogous to what can be glimpsed in the decorative style of Antóni Gaudí, whose assemblages of diverse objects affirmed certain traditions of Catalan culture at the same time that they prospected new understandings of that culture by virtue of their collage-like mash-up of meanings. James's accounts of religious experiences, similarly arranged alongside each other, is modernist art as well, informed equally by Catholic mystical sensibilities and a rhetoric of scientism. James's foremost interest in *Varieties* was aesthetic balance, with the feeling individual cast in the role of fulcrum for the scales. His modernism there is recognizable in his implicit claim for the aesthetic processing of experience as play between feeling and abstraction, resolution and contradiction, subjective mood and empirically driven analysis.

Modernism considered as a spectrum of orientations to space among religious Americans is the topic of John Corrigan's essay. Corrigan proposes several examples to illustrate how the spatial positioning of religious groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be organized on a three-dimensional spectrum whose axes represent groups that (1) cultivate difference, (2) seek to escape difference, and (3) resist recognizing difference. Corrigan observes how urban Catholics employed a baroque style of church decoration as a means of projecting Catholic identity in places where non-Catholics were highly visible and powerful. On the other hand, there were Protestants such as Episcopalians in Philadelphia, who retreated from confrontations over religious difference to a countryside imagined as empty of others. And fundamentalists, for all of their joining in debate with other religious groups, built revival tabernacles in spaces that rarely made statements about either their opponents or their allies. All of which is to say that the spatial practices of American Christians at the time suggest that both those who shaped the modern and those who resisted it were more complicated than we sometimes imagine them.