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Anthology Neglects Beliefs of Many in U.S.

By Zachary Karabell
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At the end of the 20th century, Americans are at once the most secular and most religious country in the world, secular in our materialism and acquisitiveness, religious in our stated belief in some sort of God and in our often anguished and very public quests for happiness, fulfillment and enlightenment.

As testament to those quests, Philip Zaleski, who teaches religion and English at Smith College and Wesleyan University, assembled 29 essays and nine poems published in the last year that touch on aspects of religious experience.

"Our current cultural situation," he writes, "puts us at an advantage in the production of good spiritual writing." Why? Because the tension between the values of materialism and "our highest aspirations" forces writers to struggle, and given that "all great writing is born in struggle," spiritual writing today is often great writing.

The premise may be sound, but the product does not always justify it. From this collection, it seems that when contemporary writers turn to religion, they focus on syncretic beliefs and the New Age. A substantial number of the essays speak of Zen Buddhism. Zen was the faith of choice for '60s seekers, and Zen centers dot the American landscape. Lawrence Shainberg writes of his encounters with Bernard Glassman Sensei and his struggles with "the wheels of dharma." I'm sure Glassman is a compelling spiritual teacher, but a New York Jew schooled in the arcana of Zen meditation is not what one might call representative of American religion. Janwillem van de Wetering writes about a Zen prayer, and Natalie Goldberg tells how a dog bite showed her the way of Zen more than months spent in a monastery.

Equally prominent are essays on Jewish religion and spirituality. There are 6 million Jews in the United States, and many of the writers excerpted by Zaleski speak of trying to connect to Jewish mysticism, to the cabala and to the hidden meanings of the Torah. Rabbi Marc Gellman offers a delightful rumination on angels in the Jewish tradition, while Cynthia Ozick gives us a brief but powerful interpretation of the Sabbath as the first and most important marker of civilization.

The rest of the essays touch either on traditional Christianity or on nondenominational religious experience. Kimberley Patton talks of being an Orthodox Christian and the support it gave her through her pregnancy. Gretel Ehrlich muses existentially in the midst of the dark Greenlandic winter. Huston Smith reminds us of the teachings of the Native Americans of the Southwest, while Francine Prose creates a vivid portrait of life and death in New York's Bellevue Hospital.

Some of the writing is a marvel to read. Gellman has an easy conversational tone that manages to convey a surprising depth, while Prose lulls us with morgue stories that are anything but macabre. Some of the writing has that mushy New Age feel that some people adore. Thomas Moore, whose books on spirituality have sold millions, manages to be both treacly and insubstantial. But even when the writing itself is superb, the book overall exposes a cultural divide that neither its editor nor its contributors seem aware of. In her introduction, Patricia Hampl writes: "We are born into a tradition of disbelief... Our culture doesn't worry ... that God doesn't listen. We suspect He doesn't exist."

Which "we" is she talking about? The "we" defined by urban intellectuals, writers, poets, essayists? The "we" of travelers and Zen seekers and college professors? From these essays, it is clear that that "we" does indeed struggle with the search

for God. That “we” confronts the new millennium with a burning desire to serve the needs of the spirit without binding itself to the rigidity of organized religion. That “we” seeks faith while remaining suspicious of dogma and belief.

But that “we” isn’t America. The majority American “we” believes in God, likes organized religion and prefers the moral certainties of dogma. Zaleski offers a limited slice of American religious life, one that will speak to most of the urban, educated readers who will buy the book, but not one that reflects the culture as a whole. As he prepares to compile the Best Spiritual Writing of 1999, perhaps Zaleski will look to vast segments of American experience not represented in the current volume, to Evangelicals, Southern Baptists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Scientists, Methodists and Muslims. That writing may not be as polished or as literate, but the tapestry will be more textured, more complicated and more challenging.

Zachary Karabell is the author of several books on American culture and wrote the chapter on religion for “The Columbia History of the 20th Century.”



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