

Thomas Albert Howard, *God and the Atlantic: America, Europe, and the Religious Divide*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

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“That’s OK, McDonalds will be there.” This was one of the teasing remarks German friends and family made to me in response to news that the United States would not have an exhibition at the World’s Fair in Hanover over a decade ago. While intended mostly as lighthearted humor, such comments contain a critique of American culture which, as this book reveals, emerges out of a vast historical landscape of anti-American attitudes by intellectuals across the political spectrum in Europe. Thomas Howard provides a detailed tour through this nuanced terrain of anti-American attitudes with focused attention on European views of American religion. The author expertly demonstrates that Europeans’ assessment of American religion is not *simply* negative. He systematically points out the reasons for their disdain by marshaling evidence from two dozen intellectuals – mostly from Germany and France in the nineteenth century. In the final third of his book Howard also brings into focus two European scholars – Philip Schaff and Jacques Maritain – who have more positive assessments of American religion and evaluates why this is the case.

This book is unquestionably valuable for scholars interested in the intellectual history of the embattled but remarkably resilient “secularization thesis.” While clearly intended as a history of European intellectuals’ views on American religion, some readers may still be frustrated by Howard’s tendency to only briefly note the wider social context of many of the intellectuals to whom he refers. For example, in his otherwise excellent discussion of Jacques Maritain, he does not mention that Maritain’s call for a “new Christendom” in the mid 1930’s was an important part of the intellectual framework for Christian intellectuals’ work in creating the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Historical variations in European popular religion are also not assessed in this book in order to tease out the extent to which the practice of nineteenth century European religion actually differed from American practice. It surely was different, but perhaps not to the extent that intellectuals thought it was.

While mostly a book for specialists in European and American intellectual history it would be appealing to others as well. European students of American religion, for example, in order to help them understand the reasons for their sometimes unexamined assumptions about American religion would find this book a helpful companion to determine the extent to which their attitudes toward American religion are based on the empirical reality of American religious experience or on inherited European assumptions about the same. Scholars of American diplomacy who read this book would more fully appreciate the nuances of European attitudes toward American religion regardless of who sits in the Oval Office. *God and the Atlantic* also complements popular books like Dick Martin’s *Rebuilding Brand America* (New York: AMACOM, 2007). While Martin sought to demonstrate the value of advertising research for improving America’s image, Howard demonstrates that when European and American views of religion are concerned the differences are much more substantive than a passing remark about McDonalds as America might suggest.

