Leonard's "A sense of the heart: Christian religious experience in the United States" (Book Review)

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Bill Leonard, Professor of Baptist Studies and Church History in the School of Divinity at Wake Forest University, uses Jonathan Edwards’ definition of religious experience as a “sense of the heart” to encapsulate various expressions of religious experience among individuals and communities in the United States from the colonial period to the beginning of the twenty-first century. This scholarly work traces religion in America chronologically and thematically and provides an extensive sampling of varied religious experience demonstrating the complexity of defining outward signs of genuine conversion and qualifications for church membership.

Leonard masterfully weaves religious leaders, doctrines, religious debates, and cultural and social contexts together to paint a picture of the unfolding of various expressions of religious experience. Covering Colonial Catholicism, The Great Awakenings, Camp Meetings, Transcendentalism and Spiritualism, Quakers and Shakers, “Hush Arbors” of African slaves, Altar Theology and the “Anxious Bench”, the 1906 Azusa Street Revival, the Crystal Cathedral and the Prosperity Gospel, the author gives insights into the lives of religious leaders and communities in their quest to commune with God.

In the last chapter, the author provides five representative approaches to conversion: Plan conversionism; Lordship conversionism; Positive-Thinking conversionism; Marketing conversionism, and Propositional conversionism, demonstrating how various religious leaders or groups represented each of these approaches.

This book provides the reader with a foundational understanding of the history of religious experience in America leading up to the current environment of “spiritual but not religious” as expressed by “believers but not belongers.” He quotes Diana Butler Bass, who writes that “despite a certain linguistic fuzziness, the word ‘spiritual’ is both a critique of institutional religion and a longing for meaningful connection.” This approach may well describe “a search for new gods in a world where older forms of religion “and the institutions that preached, preserved, and protected them have lost credibility.” “Spirituality”, then, may actually represent “an important stage of awakening” (p. 314).

**Reviewer**

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