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Review of Howard's "God and the Atlantic: America, Europe, and the Religious Divide"

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"That’s OK, McDonald’s 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 that, as this book reveals, emerges from a vast historical landscape of anti-American attitudes held by intellectuals across the political spectrum in Europe. Thomas Albert Howard provides a detailed tour through this nuanced terrain of anti-American attitudes, focusing 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 valuable for scholars interested in the intellectual history of the embattled but remarkably resilient “secularization thesis.”
While *God and the Atlantic* is clearly intended as a history of European intellectuals’ views on American religion, readers may still be frustrated by Howard’s tendency to note only briefly the wider social context of many of the intellectuals to whom he refers. For example, in his otherwise excellent discussion of Maritain, he does not mention that Maritain’s call for a “new Christendom” in the mid-1930s was an important part of the intellectual framework for Christian intellectuals’ participation in creating the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Historical variations in European popular religion are also not assessed to tease out the extent to which the practice of nineteenth-century European religion 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 appeal to others as well. To help European students of American religion understand their sometimes-unexamined assumptions, for example, this book would be 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. Scholars of American diplomacy who read this book will 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 such as Dick Martin’s *Rebuilding Brand America* (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 McDonald’s as America might suggest.

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