

Rolf Lundén. *Business and Religion in the American 1920s*. Contributions in American Studies 91. Series Editor: Robert H. Walker. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988. 204 pp. including a Note on Method, Bibliography, and Index.

Rolf Lundén's study is a welcome addition to a prestigious series of monographs devoted to the interaction of politics and culture. The strength of the book is its thorough research, its clear outline, and its well structured thesis. It is very well written, indeed, it is a pleasure to read. Lundén maintains that business rhetoric and method developed an extraordinary influence on American religion in the 1920s and, in addition, that religion provided "an idealistic and spiritual dimension to entrepreneurial activities."

The idea of a close interaction between business and religion in America would appear as an exception to Adam Smith's famous remark that he had never known much good done by those who affected to trade, not for private profit, but "for the public good. It is an affectation, indeed, not very common among merchants, and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it." Lundén, however, argues persuasively that American culture in the 1920s was distinguished by a more systematic attempt to concoct "a business religion". Lundén describes the well publicized campaign to couple business values with spiritual values and the equally well organized attempt to promote Protestant religious habits with reference to profit and economic success. Business spokesmen wanted to overcome the persistent

religious distrust of business behavior. Religious leaders seemed afraid that Protestantism was becoming irrelevant to the dominant form of power in America.

A general problem behind this kind of study is that its central concepts—such as "business" and "religion"—may undergo significant change over time. "Business" in the 1920s obviously referred to a set of practices quite different from what Benjamin Franklin might have had in mind. Similarly, it is doubtful that Cotton Mather or Jonathan Edwards would have been able to recognize the American celebration of success as a set of spiritual values that deserved the name of religion. It is safe to say that the campaign to integrate business and religion in the 1920s presupposed that the audience would be unable to distinguish between "business" as Adam's curse, as a calling, or as a structure of power.

Similarly, the propaganda effort assumed that nobody could distinguish between religion as an organized system of faith and religion as the expression of revealed truth. Inattention to such changes narrows the historical scope of the book with the result that the suggestive notion of "a business religion" remains largely unexplored. In particular, there is no attempt to relate the conclusions to recent work of American Studies, such as the work of T. J. Jackson Lears (see for example *The Culture of Consumption*, ed. by Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears. New York: Pantheon, 1983). It would be interesting to learn about the specific economic and/or cultural conditions that made corporate managers and protestant ministers so eager to forge an alliance. Thus, it seems that many of the quotations that Lundén has dug up catered not to the need to make entrepreneurs devoted to the strenuous life of competitive capitalism, but rather served to teach the believers to become good sales managers and eager consumers, i.e. to dispose the audience for the specific forms of power and powerlessness embodied in the corporate structure of the economy.

Niels Thorsen

University of Copenhagen