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Book of the Month: American Heathens

Review by Quincy D. Newell

In his wonderful, and still relatively new, book *American Heathens: Religion, Race, and Reconstruction in California* (University of California Press and Huntington Library, 2012), Joshua Paddison transports us to post-Civil War California, where the meaning of citizenship is under debate. Who was American? Paddison argues that California stood at the center of the debate because of its multiethnic society, where “race” included black and white but also Indian and Chinese, where “religion” included Protestant, Catholic, and several varieties of non-Christian. For those of us dissatisfied with a narrative of American race relations that concentrates on the black-white binary, Paddison’s story is a refreshing new take on the postbellum years.
Paddison’s main arguments are, first, “that religion was central to formations of race and citizenship in the post-Civil War United States” (4), and second, “that Reconstruction was a multiracial and multiregional process of national reimagining” that resulted in “a knitting together of North, South, and West around a newly robust white Christian identity during the course of” the decade following the removal of federal troops from the South in 1877 (5).

Paddison tells this story with a remarkable attention to detail, weaving together tales of individual preachers, converts, and activists (one of whom, Jee Gam, Paddison has written about here before) to demonstrate the issues at play and the halting, incremental accumulation of support for a definition of citizenship centered around race, religion, and gender: white Christian manhood. This is not a simple story: as Paddison writes, “the nation’s rejection of Indians and Chinese immigrants as citizens in the 1880s came not as a result of race ‘trumping’ religion. Rather, one religio-racial vision—Christian white male supremacy—triumphed over another that emphasized anti-Catholicism and paternalistic racial uplift” (9).

Paddison focuses on the Indian and Chinese “questions” in California, which centered around the positioning of non-white, but (at least potentially) Christian people within American society. These questions found practical application in proposed legislation on immigration, in the Chinese case, and allotment, in the case of Indians. A surprisingly wide array of factions mobilized around these questions, each jockeying for religio-racial position. Protestant ministers sought to extend a vision of Manifest Destiny that brought all racial and national groups into the Christian fold, an optimistic program built, at times, on a virulent anti-Catholicism. Meanwhile, Irish-American and Mexican-American Catholics sought to consolidate their position in the new national order by emphasizing the unassimilability of Chinese immigrants and Indians, regardless of their religious affiliations.

Perhaps most striking about this story is the change over time that Paddison documents. As decades pass, we see staunch supporters of the Indians and Chinese soften and then reverse their positions. When these groups lose their (white, Protestant, male) advocates, Paddison shows, the way is opened for Congress to pass exclusion acts that severely restrict Chinese immigration and the Allotment Act, which does much to destroy Indian cultures.

In my view, the most important aspect of Paddison’s book is
the way in which it integrates California into the history of Reconstruction and thereby refocuses the conversation, insisting that the story cannot be understood without taking the West into account. Just as California served as a model for the nation in the story that Paddison tells, Paddison’s nuanced treatment of the entanglement of race and religion in the political questions of postbellum California is a model for the rest of us.