# Religiosity in Middletown

**All Faithful People**. Change and Continuity in Middletown's Religion. THEODORE CAPLOW, HOWARD M. BAHR, BRUCE A. CHADWICK, and four others. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1983. x, 380 pp. $19.50.

This volume is the second of several reports to be based on the research of the Middletown III project, undertaken by a team of social scientists in the mid-1970's to replicate the classic studies of Robert and Helen Lynd in the 1920's and 1930's. Middletown is of course the small midwestern city of Muncie, Indiana, and the subject of the most celebrated of community studies, presumably because of its location so close to the center of American culture. As did the Lynds before them, the present researchers went to Muncie to study social and cultural change. Half a century had passed in an age of unprecedented changes in the way Americans live, but had Middletown changed very much in these intervening years? How were the basic social institutions of that community holding up in the face of modernization? What can Middletown tell us about contemporary America?

*All Faithful People* is an inquiry into change and continuity in the religious life of Middletown during these years, and its conclusion is quite clear: continuity more than change is the pattern with respect to religion. What is striking to the researchers is that they find so much religious vitality in the community, the fact that in Muncie conventional forms of piety are flourishing today; indeed, levels of religious observance and practice appear actually to be higher now than two generations ago. Based on survey methods and, when possible, responses to questions identical with those asked by the Lynds, the results point to the persistence of traditional religion and its strong hold on the lives of Middletown's citizens. More than this, the researchers are convinced that claims of religion's demise in the modern world have been exaggerated, that secularization is more a myth than a reality.

Secularization as a general issue is important not only for contemporary debate but also because the Lynds assumed that it was an inevitable process of change in the 1920's. Using the earlier study as a benchmark, the present researchers examine trends since that time for 11 institutional religious indicators: church attendance, number of churches in proportion to population, rites of passage, religious endogamy, religious functionaries, financial contributions, devotional activity, religion in the mass media, religious emotionalism, sectarian movements, and sermon topics. The most fundamental indicator—church attendance—shows a significant rise during these years. In fact, of the 11 indicators, only one—a slight rise in the proportion of interdenominational marriages—is in the secular direction. All the other trends run the opposite way, pointing to a continuing flourishing religious environment. There is evidence of less dogmatism and religious intolerance at present, but generally Middletown appears to be a more religious place now than when the Lynds visited it.

Many would agree that secularization is neither as pervasive nor as irreversible as once thought. Traditional religious forms, even the most antimodernist, fundamentalist expressions, are very much alive in the modern world. Yet so complex and multifaceted a phenomenon as secularization is not easily captured by institutional indicators. The persistence of traditional religion does not preclude transformations of its meanings and a secularization of consciousness. Modernity brings about accommodations of religion and culture that are subtle and far-reaching, not the least of which is the privatization of religious realities. Privatization implies a deeply personal religious expression largely divorced from the larger public sector—a turning inward upon one's self, the family, the community. What we have in the study is a description of this inner religious world of Middletown, but lacking is an analysis of the structural features of modern society that sustain and complicate it. Outside influences such as the media and the national culture, and the part they play in shaping the religious life of the community, are largely overlooked; the view is that of a self-contained, encapsulated world described as "archaic, fragmented, and wonderfully untroubled."

At present the country is caught up in a conservative religious resurgence, and the ethos found in Middletown probably prevails in much of America. Just how representative it is, of course, is impossible to say. The authors believe that it would be inaccurate to think of Muncie as a museum of old-time religion, yet they are hard pressed in making a case that Middletown's religious profile matches that of the nation. Of Middletown, it is said that it contains "nothing extraordinary," a fact that distances it from many of the tensions and strains of contemporary American religion. As the researchers admit, many of the figures that create a stir elsewhere are less prominent here: worker priests, women rabbis, Indian gurus, even the prime-time preachers of the electronic church.

For these reasons, the work is not likely to settle the debate over secularization. Neither are the parameters of secular change fully explored, nor can the conclusions be generalized to America. As with any community study, the strength of the work lies in the rich description of a particular locale. No doubt more is known about Middletown than about any other community in the country, and the volume adds to this storehouse of information with its coverage of religion. For this reason alone, it is a significant contribution to the study of religion in America and deserves a wide readership.

WADE CLARK ROOF
*Department of Sociology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst 01003*

## Black Life: A Reconstruction

**The Archaeology of Social Disintegration in Skunk Hollow.** A Nineteenth-Century Rural Black Community. JOAN H. GEISMAR. Academic Press, New York, 1982. xii, 276 pp., illus. $24.50. Studies in Historical Archaeology.

During the past 30 years, historians have produced an impressive number of studies about black life in the United States. Few of these studies have been able to penetrate the silence of traditional sources on working-class and rural black life. Combining analyses of historical sources and archeologically rendered artifacts, the new field of historical archeology (along with oral history) promises a way to reach the history of the inarticulate. Skunk Hollow provides one