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

of the first book-length reports on the application of this method to the site of a small, rural Afro-American community.

Geismar attempts tasks that are very difficult given the limited sources available: to document the presence and nature of life in this 19th-century New Jersey community, and, most important, as the book's title suggests, to determine the cause or causes of the community's demise in the early 1900's. Historical archeology is very well suited to the first, but its value as a method for uncovering causes of community decline is less clear. Though Geismar demonstrates considerable analytical rigor and ingenuity on this issue, this reviewer remains unconvinced that this was the most appropriate question around which to organize the study.

Since slavery persisted in New Jersey until the 1860's, blacks (free and slave) had good reason to cluster for support and protection. This and the desire to own land probably account for the presence of Skunk Hollow. The first black land purchase at the site along the Hudson River Palisades near New York State came in 1806. (The abundance of skunk cabbage accounts for the name.) Nevertheless, the community grew slowly. In 1830, there were only four households (25 residents); at its peak in 1880, the community housed 13 households (75 residents). Shortly after the 1880 census, however, the population declined precipitously; the site was abandoned in 1905.

Although not complete, Geismar's reconstruction of the community is the most impressive part of the study. Through analyses of disparate sources she provides insights into community structure and everyday life. She fits Skunk Hollow into a larger context by comparison with other studies of black social organization and archeological sites.

Community residents confronted a marginal life; men worked as laborers, women as laundresses or servants. Because many families owned land, they had, in relative terms, more security than neighboring blacks. Moreover, blacks at Skunk Hollow constructed stable, two-parent families. This confirms similar findings by historians who reported little evidence of family breakdown, that is, single-parent, female-headed households. By tracing family form over three generations, Geismar adds considerably to these findings. She also demonstrates how residents linked themselves into large kin networks through intermarriage.

Sometime around 1856, Skunk Hollow residents constructed a church and chose William Thompson, a long-time resident, as minister. Since the church was the only known community organization, its importance and that of its minister would have been great. Thompson's status in the community is also linked to his land holdings.

" 'Aunt' Betsy Thompson, widow of the Reverend William Thompson; Photo taken ca. 1906 when she was reputed to be 99 years old. Mrs. Thompson died in 1907." [From H. Archer Stansbury and Alice Munro Haagensen; reproduced in *The Archaeology of Social Disintegration in Skunk Hollow*]

Given this stability and strong institutional development, Skunk Hollow's rapid decline is surprising. By 1885, the population dropped by nearly two-thirds. Geismar links this decline to Thompson's death in the 1880's. To explain this, she draws on the work of the sociologist George Homans. Homans found that the loss of an important leader in a small community could lead to diminished contacts among community members; this, in turn, could lead to social disintegration. An important sign of this process is the decline in status differences within the group. It is this change in status differences, as reflected in the material culture of each of the various households, that Geismar sets out to demonstrate. Having established this part of the theory, she then infers that community disintegration resulted from Thompson's death.

Since historical sources provide little information on this matter, Geismar utilized a "systematic collection of artifacts located on the surface" around each of the household sites as data. Though souvenir hunters had picked over the area, the collection netted 12,000 artifacts, largely leather fragments, faunal material, coal, plaster fragments, bricks, glass fragments, ceramics, and metal fragments.

Analyses by these categories provided data on the community, but the major effort focused on determining change in status among residents around the time of population decline. Since ceramics are most amenable to interpretations of status, Geismar subjected each household sample to chronological and comparative analyses. Though she provides data to support her hypothesis, this falls short of demonstrating a causal link between Thompson's death and community decline. The approach is interesting and innovative, but other factors that might have contributed to the decline are not developed, nor does Geismar look for the old community reestablished in a new setting.

In her quest for changes in status differences, Geismar leaves a number of areas of inquiry largely unexplored. There is little development of patterns of Afro-American culture from the site. Similarly, the study provides very little analysis of the site layout, the built environment, and their implications for community, and the implications for family life when 12 people share a house 15 by 19 feet go unconsidered. Moreover, though Skunk Hollow is alleged to have been economically independent, all adults relied on outside employment for primary support; the book also fails to develop fully information on the supplementary domestic economy.

Most disturbing in this ambitious, multidisciplinary effort are the many missed opportunities to "co-mingle" insights and data from the different approaches. Geismar carefully keeps her historical and her archeological data apart. She effectively uses each to support findings in the other but does not integrate the analyses to go beyond the limits of each.

This account of Skunk Hollow is, however, an interesting and valuable study of a neglected subject. If it fails to fully deliver on the promises of the field, it demonstrates, nevertheless, the potential of historical archeology to reveal to us much about the lives and cultures of "inarticulate" Americans of the past.

JAMES BORCHERT

Merrill College,
University of California,
Santa Cruz 95064