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THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education.

Scholars Infuse Religion With Cultural Light

ALAN WOLFE. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Washington: Oct 22, 2004. Vol. 51, Iss. 9; pg. B.6

Subjects: Spirituality, Culture, Religion
 Locations: United States, US
 Author(s): ALAN WOLFE
 Document types: Commentary
 Section: *THE CHRONICLE REVIEW*
 Publication title: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Washington: Oct 22, 2004. Vol. 51, Iss. 9; pg. B.6
 Source type: Periodical
 ISSN/ISBN: 00095982
 ProQuest document ID: 750671011
 Text Word Count 1899
 Document URL: <http://libdata.lib.ua.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?did=750671011&sid=7&Fmt=3&clientId=31537&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

Abstract (Document Summary)

For decades American scholars assumed that society was becoming more secular, but a revival in spiritual belief is sparking new scholarship on the interplay of religion and culture. Wolfe questions whether scholarship on religion is up to the task of offering Americans insights on the controversies that surround them.

Full Text (1899 words)

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Religion is playing a major role in the 2004 campaign for the presidency. Conservative faiths are growing rapidly, in the United States as well as abroad. While a clash of civilizations may not be taking place, religious conflict -- primarily, but not exclusively, in the Middle East -- is a major cause of global instability.

All of those statements are not only true but testify to the importance of religion in the contemporary world. They also raise the question of whether scholarship on religion is up to the task of offering Americans insights on the controversies that surround them.

Thirty years ago, the answer to that question would have been negative. Religion had been instrumental in the founding of at least two academic disciplines: sociology, because of the focus of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim on the role of religion in maintaining social order, and anthropology, because of its interest in ritual and symbols. Yet persuaded that the world was becoming increasingly secular and dedicated to value-free scholarship ill equipped to deal with passionate and irreconcilable beliefs, social scientists from the 1960s until the 1980s treated religion as marginal to their concerns. Combined with the conviction on the part of many natural scientists that religion was hostile to their enterprise and a turn in the humanities away from actual texts like *Paradise Lost* in favor of theories about how such works can or should be read, that left American academics outside of divinity schools unready for the religious revival that seemed to take on new life in the 1990s, particularly the rise of evangelical religions and the decline of mainline ones.

The academic study of religion, having badly missed the boat on one of the most profound social transformations of our time, has a lot of catching up to do. The good news is that the process has started, as a plethora of books and scholarly articles dealing with religion has begun to appear. There may even be an advantage to the late start in academic scholarship on the role of religion in American life: Scholars have been able to incorporate recent approaches that show considerable promise.

One involves ethnographic description of individuals and the groups with which they affiliate. Looking under the conventional labels used to depict religious believers, ethnographers and cultural historians are uncovering some unexpected findings. We know, for example, that religious conservatives are likely to vote Republican, but what, exactly, does it mean to be a religious conservative? If the scholarship of historians like R. Marie Griffith or sociologists like Gerardo Marti is any indication, it does not necessarily mean

