

Spirit Wars

The spectacular resurgence of evangelical Christianity has obscured the fact that there's another side to the American religious coin. Spiritual seekers, from New Age animists to sober U.S. senators, have a long and honorable lineage in American life—and the potential to inspire a rebirth of liberal politics.

by Leigh E. Schmidt

America may be polarized, but in one activity its social critics have achieved a rare unanimity: lambasting American “spirituality” in all its New Age quirkiness and anarchic individualism. The range of detractors is really quite impressive. James A. Herrick, an evangelical Christian author, deplores the “new spirituality” as a mélange of Gnostics, goddess worshipers, and self-proclaimed UFO abductees out to usurp the place of Christianity: all told, a widespread but shallowly rooted challenge to the mighty religious inheritance of the West. The neoconservative pundit David Brooks of *The New York Times* thinks that a “soft-core spirituality,” with its attendant “psychobabble” and “easygoing narcissism,” is epidemic. Observers on the left are no less prone to alarm. One pair of such commentators warned recently that the rebranding of religion as “spirituality” is part of corporate capitalism’s “silent takeover” of the interior life, the sly marketing of a private, consumerist faith in the service of global enterprise.

Even many scholars of religion have jumped on the bandwagon. Martin E. Marty, the widely esteemed historian of American Christianity and professor emeritus at the University of Chicago, published an opinion piece this past January in *Christian Century* in which he labeled the “spirituality” versus “religion” debate “a defining conflict of our time.” He made crystal clear that he stood on the side of the old-time religion of church pews, potluck suppers, and hymnbooks, against the “banal” and “solipsistic” world of “religionless spirituality.” More re-

cently, in the July-August issue of *Utne* magazine, Paul R. Powers, a professor of religious studies at Lewis and Clark College, thumped the editors for reprinting a “soft-headed” article on spirituality: “Why American liberals who seem so happy to embrace difference in various contexts want, when it comes to religion, to sweep it under the rug of some invented, undefined, supposedly universal ‘spirituality’ remains one of the true religious mysteries of our times.”

Detractors of American religious seeking have been building their case for a while now. A bellwether was *Habits of the Heart* (1985), the best-selling, multiauthored sociological study of the corrosive effects individualism was having on American civic and religious institutions. The authors deeply lamented “liberalized versions” of morality and spirituality and argued that the old romantic ideals of self-reliance and the open road were now undermining the welfare of community, family, and congregation. “Finding oneself” and “leaving church” had, sadly enough, become complementary processes in a culture too long steeped in the expressive individualism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and their fellow wayfarers. More and more Americans were crafting their own religious stories apart from the rich moral vocabularies and collective memories that communities of faith provided. The social costs of such disjointed spiritual quests were evident not only in the fraying of church life but in eroding commitments to public citizenship, marriage, and family.



Senator Barack Obama (D-Ill.) cites his mother's faith as the source of his own views on tolerance and racial harmony. He often invokes the term spiritual as a key to these "broader values."

All this criticism of the "new spirituality" has obscured and diminished what is, in fact, an important American tradition, one in which spiritual journeying has long been joined to social and political progressivism. Emerson's "endless seeker" was, as often as not, an abolitionist; Whitman's "traveling soul," a champion of women's rights; Henry David Thoreau's "hermit," a challenger of unjust war. A good sense of the continuing moral and political import of this American vocabulary of the spirit comes from Barack Obama, the recently elected Democratic senator from Illinois. Obama has said that, despite the results of the 2004 election, it "shouldn't be hard" to reconnect progressive politics with religious vision: "Martin Luther King did it. The abolitionists did it. Dorothy Day did it. . . . We don't have to start from scratch."

Perhaps Obama's most telling remark came in his observations about his mother's faith: "My mother saw religion as an imped-

iment to broader values, like tolerance and racial inclusivity. She remembered church-going folks who also called people nigger. But she was a deeply spiritual person, and when I moved to Chicago and worked with church-based community organizations, I kept hearing her values expressed." Obama's invocation of "spiritual" as an inclusive term, inextricably interwoven with the "broader values" of American democracy, is important and carefully chosen diction. It not only conjures up Whitman's ghost but also suggests some of the poet's own audacity. As a concept of consequence in American culture, spirituality was born of the romantic aspirations and ethical passions of Emersonians, Whitmanites, and other religious liberals. Its history is worth recovering from the heap of critical commentary, as both a counterweight to the Religious Right and a resource for the Left (which is now so often tone-deaf on spiritual matters).

In 1800, the word *spirituality* had little

Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau sought and found spiritual solitude at Walden Pond, but some critics worried that his writings would act as a siren call to tempt disaffected churchgoers with a heady, mystical—but elusive—spirituality.

resonance in the evangelical Protestant vernacular of personal devotion, but during the ensuing century of transcendentalist ferment, it gradually shifted from being an abstractly metaphysical term, denoting an attribute of God or the immaterial quality of the soul, to one highly charged with independence, interiority, and eccentricity. “The ripeness of Religion is doubtless to be looked for in this field of individuality,” Whitman wrote in *Democratic Vistas* in 1871, “and is a result that no organization or church can ever achieve. . . . I should say, indeed, that only in the perfect uncontamination and solitariness of individuality may the spirituality of religion come forth at all. Only here, and on such terms, the meditation, the devout ecstasy, the soaring flight.” Or, as the Harvard poet and philosopher George Santayana remarked succinctly in 1905, “This aspiring side of religion may be called Spirituality.”

Spirituality was a hard term to pin down, all the more so once it took transcendentalist flight. Despite the airy and expansive qualities that came to be conferred upon spirituality in Emersonian and Whitmanite circles, it had certain defining characteristics, six of which were especially prominent:

- a yearning for mystical experience or epiphanic awareness
- a valuing of silence, solitude, and sustained meditation
- a belief in the immanence of the divine in nature and attunement to that presence
- a cosmopolitan appreciation of religious variety, along with a search for unity in diversity
- an ethical earnestness in pursuit of justice-producing, progressive reforms
- an emphasis on self-cultivation, artistic creativity, and adventuresome seeking

This liberal reimagining of the interior life and its fruits had sweeping and enduring effects on American religious life, often for the good. It created a more open and expansive

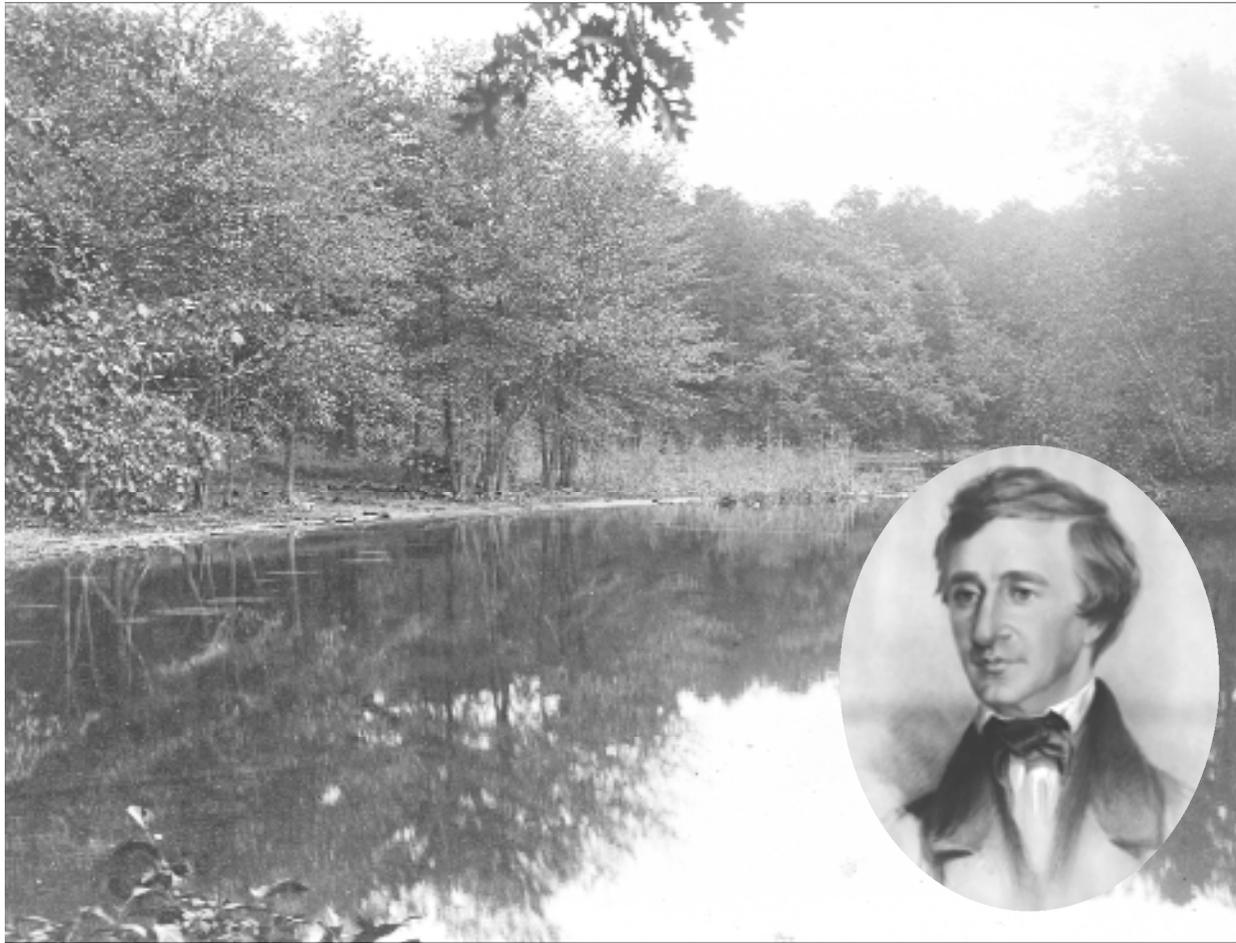
sense of religious identity; it challenged American Christian claims to supremacy and exclusivity; and it promoted an “ethical mysticism.” Liberals, indeed, could be rather tendentious about the latter. For instance, John Wright Buckham, a Methodist, insisted in 1915 on a “social mysticism” of active service to others, a spirituality that engaged the industrial crisis and the economic order. Without that component, Buckham would not count a person’s piety under his heading of “Normal Mysticism.”

Of course, spirituality as it was crafted by these 19th-century cosmopolitans and their heirs always had plenty of idiosyncrasies and failings. Still, its makers engaged in a sharply self-critical exchange, in which they anticipated most of the challenges that are still posed to their vision of religious interiority. Take the devotion to solitude, for example. These religious liberals prized serene meditation, romanticized the hermit’s life, and longed for mystical experience in forests and mountains rather than in churches. Were those emphases not a prescription for solipsism and isolation, and an ultimately fatal alienation from community and tradition?

William R. Alger, a second-generation transcendentalist who (unlike Emerson) never left the Unitarian ministry, offered the era’s fullest exposition of seclusion in *The Solitudes of Nature and of Man; or, The Loneliness of Human Life* (1866). “The aboriginal woods of western North America,” Alger fantasized, “seem as if they might harbor a million anchorites, not one of whom should be within a day’s journey of any other.” Yet he meditated on solitude precisely because he was seeking a remedy for



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the larger social estrangements and self-absorbed anxieties he found all around him in a market-dominated world of go-getting success and failure. “This is the malady of the age—an age of Narcissuses,” he claimed. The occasional retreat into solitude that he recommended was actually imagined as a means of liberating its practitioners from the increasingly “morbid consciousness of self.”

So was Alger merely turning solitude into a form of feel-good therapy? Was he saying that well-to-do city folk needed a nice summer cottage where they could refresh their souls before rejoining the capitalist grind? Certainly he imagined his advice as having a lot more bite than that. Though he had reverently attended Thoreau’s funeral and listened with solemn attention as the church bell “toll[ed] the forty-four years he had numbered,” Alger was an unusually harsh in-house critic when it came to the Concord hermit’s supposed “pampering of egotism.”

In a scornful critique, Alger asserted that Thoreau the writer was “constantly feeling himself, reflecting himself, fondling himself, reverberating himself, exalting himself, incapable of escaping or forgetting himself.” As a champion of a liberal and eclectic spirituality, Alger tried to lead his readers and congregants out of “self-nauseated weariness” into “God’s closet.”

Romancing solitude was pivotal for Alger, but it was not a matter of quietist retreat from the social and political world. Like his compatriots Theodore Parker and Franklin Sanborn, Alger nurtured reform commitments, particularly to the abolitionist cause. As Boston’s official Fourth of July orator in 1857, he was, by turns, hissed and applauded for his forceful denunciation of “the Slave-Power and its lovers.” “The battle between Slavery and Freedom in America is irreconcilable,” Alger exclaimed, dismissing an “ostrich-policy” of celebrating the na-

An increasingly familiar scene at public ceremonies—such as this swearing in of Los Angeles police chief William Bratton in 2002—is the interfaith blessing, including, among others, a cardinal, a rabbi, and a swami.

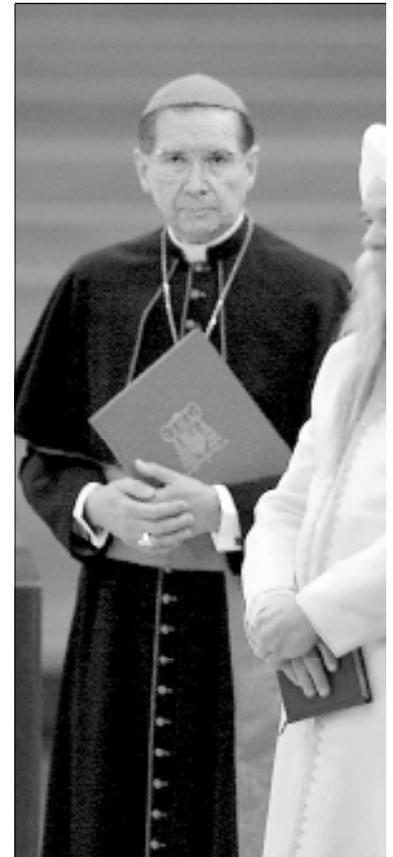
tion's independence while evading the crisis at hand. Taken aback by the furor, the board of aldermen refused him the usual etiquette of gratitude and publication; the snub launched Alger's speech into mass circulation and helped make his reputation as an antislavery agitator.

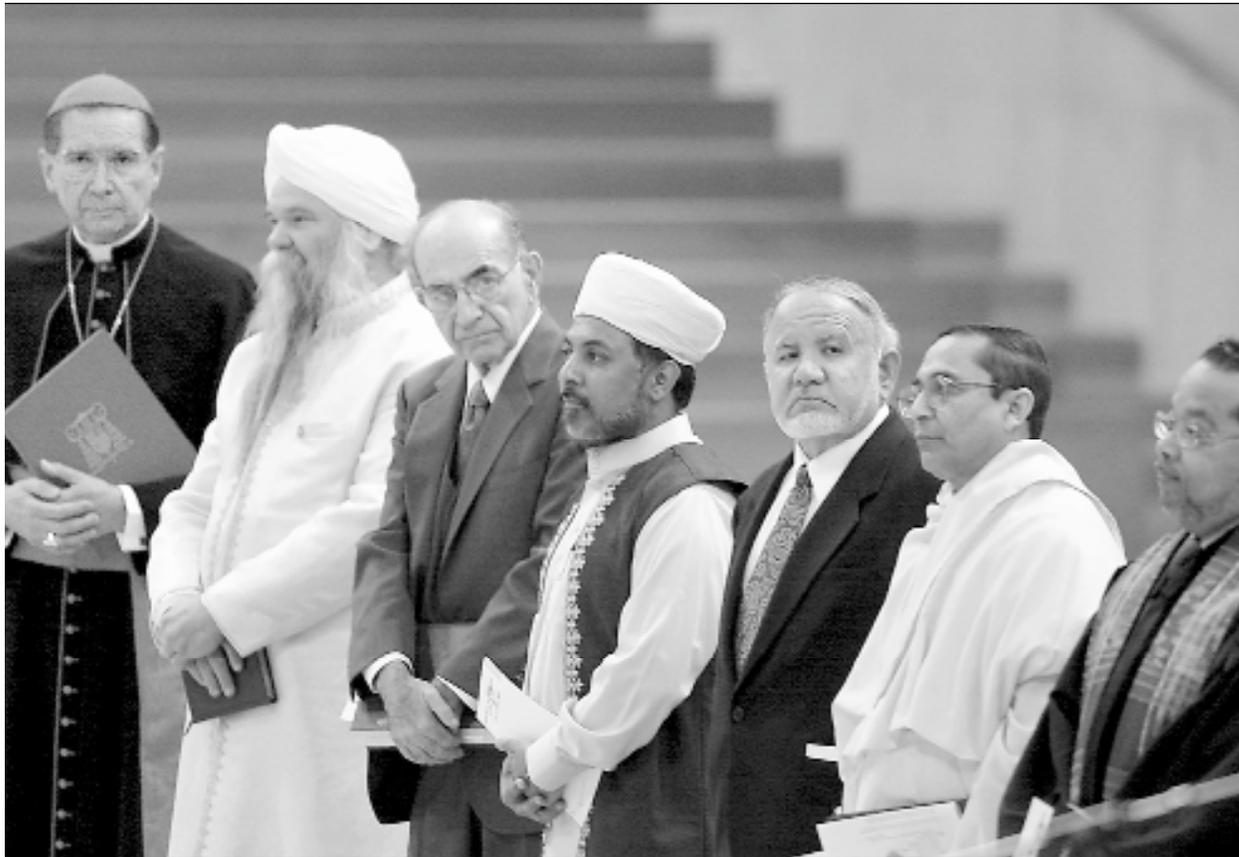
Alger was also ready, as were many of the transcendentalists, to take his readers figuratively to Persia, India, and China, and in those intellectual excursions he displayed the same misconceptions as other appropriators of "the mystic East." Many of his cultural oppositions in *The Poetry of the Orient* (1856) consisted of the usual fare, pitting "the enterprising young West" against "the meditative old East." Like the poet Coleman Barks today, Alger was particularly dazzled by the "electric freedom" of the 13th-century Sufi mystic Jalal al-Din ar-Rumi, and even proposed that Americans incorporate the "diversified disciplines" of Sufism into their own lives as a way to discover spiritual ecstasy and wonder. It was not an uncommon presumption in transcendentalist circles: Distant religious cultures offered separable scriptures and "detachable ritual morsels" for the delectation of North American dabblers weary of their own unenchanted world. The transcendentalist encounter with Asian religions was often trivializing and homogenizing, an exercise in reducing cultural differences to a universal religion that looked uncannily like Concord writ large across the globe.

But transcendentalist piety offered more than the predictable shortcomings of Orientalist fantasy. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a radical abolitionist who went on to serve as a colonel in an African-American regiment in the Civil War, heralded religious liberalism's widening vision in "The Sympathy of Religions," an essay first published in 1871 and extensively circulated thereafter. "I have worshiped in an Evangelical church when thousands rose to their feet at the motion of one hand. I have worshiped in a Roman Catholic church when the lifting of one finger broke the motionless

multitude into twinkling motion, till the magic sign was made, and all was still once more," Higginson observed, grandly sweeping aside the Protestant-Catholic antagonisms still festering across the country, before launching himself further afield. "But I never for an instant have supposed that this concentrated moment of devotion was more holy or more beautiful than when one cry from a minaret hushes a Mohammedan city to prayer, or when, at sunset, the low invocation, 'Oh! the gem in the lotus—oh! the gem in the lotus,' goes murmuring, like the cooing of many doves, across the vast surface of Thibet." In so minimizing liturgical differences, Higginson committed most of liberalism's universalizing sins, but he also imagined a cosmopolitan piety in which religious identities were open, fluxional, and sympathetic rather than closed, fixed, and proselytizing. Religious encounters across cultures were imagined as engaging rather than threatening; they were seen as occasions for parliamentary gatherings rather than mission stations. "When we fully comprehend the sympathy of religions," Higginson concluded, "we shall deal with other faiths on equal terms."

The radicalism of Higginson and his compeers created the space for an ever-widening religious exchange in American culture. In 1897, the Hindu swami Saradananda joined the conversation (and the New England lecture circuit) with his own discourse on "The Sympathy of Religions." "By sympathy," Saradananda explained, "the Vedantist [an adherent of a 19th-century Hindu reform movement] does not mean a kind of dull indifference, or haughty toleration, which seems to say, 'I know you are wrong and my religion is the on-





ly true one, yet I will let you follow it, and perhaps one day your eyes will be opened.' His sympathy is not a negative one, but it is of a direct, positive nature, which knows that all religions are true, they have the same goal." Hindus, Saradananda insisted, did not reduce the "religious orchestra of the universe" to mere "monotones." The sympathy of religions, he assured, would not be purchased at the price of particularity and variation: "The mission of Vedanta to the West is not to make Christians Hindus, but to make the Christian a better Christian, a Hindu a better Hindu, and a Mohammedan a better Mohammedan." Reaching God required specific paths, not a uniform one "in the place of the many."

The liberal architects of American spirituality came rather quickly to realize that their vision of one universal religion was at cross-purposes with their equally important ideals of cosmopolitan variety and democratic individuality. Most were not particularly interested in rolling back transcendentalist notions of spontaneity, creativity, and spir-

itual independence for the sake of religious unanimity. As the conversation among them unfolded, many insisted that for liberals to be truly liberal, their religious cosmopolitanism could not become bland and colorless. In an 1895 lecture, the Reform rabbi Solomon Schindler, after a warm introduction from Higginson himself, argued that all the talk of unifying the religions or reducing them to a common core suggested a misguided conformity. "The happiest state will come to pass," Schindler claimed, "when each individual will be allowed to formulate his own ideas regarding the universe and his position in and relation to it. Not one unified religion is the goal, but as many millions of religions as there will be individuals." Democratic individuality, not liberal universality, was the central spiritual value.

The roots of today's seeker spirituality are tangled, but they go deep in American culture and often prove, on closer inspection, to be surprisingly robust. It is hard, once one has traveled any length on the roads forward

from Emerson and Whitman, not to be impressed by the tenacity of this joined tradition of spiritual seeking and political progressivism in American religious life. Take, for example, the visionary ecumenist Sarah Farmer, who, in 1894, in Eliot, Maine, organized her own summer school for the comparative study of religion and social activism. A genius as a religious and political go-between, she hosted everyone from D. T. Suzuki, emergent ambassador of Zen Buddhism, to George Herron, renowned advocate of Christian socialism, to W. E. B. Du Bois, founder of the NAACP, to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, pioneering feminist and economist, to Anagarika Dharmapala, Sinhalese Buddhist critic of British colonialism. One partisan eulogized her, with some fairness, as “the actual fulfiller of Emerson in terms of applied influence.”

Or consider Rufus Jones, a liberal Quaker who wrote more extensively on mysticism than any other American in the first half of the 20th century, and who crucially popularized the notion of the “seeker” as a modern religious type. Jones also managed, while holding a professorship at Haverford College and writing more than a book a year on average, to help lead the American Friends Service Committee from its founding in 1917. The AFSC was initially organized to support civil service for Quaker conscientious objectors during World War I, but with the aid of Jones’s internationalist vision, it soon expanded its domain to relief work with refugees across Europe, for which service it received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947. Throughout his life, Jones imagined his Quaker faith as much through the romantic prism of Emerson, Whitman, and John Greenleaf Whittier as on the basis of the journal of George Fox, the 17th-century founder of the Religious Society of Friends.

In our own time, there is the example of Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun* magazine, who speaks of an “Emancipatory Spirituality” and expressly connects the material work of liberal progressivism to lived spiritual practice. He is adamant that what the Democrats really need is a better understanding of religion and “the politics of

meaning,” a sturdier commitment to engaging the deeper values and transcendent hopes of Americans. “The liberal world,” he claims, “has developed such knee-jerk hostility to religion” that it has “marginalized those many people on the left who actually do have spiritual yearnings.” Echoes of the same idiom can be heard in *The Future of American Progressivism* (1998), by Roberto Unger and Cornel West. Unger and West link “the re-energizing of democratic politics” to “the American religion of possibility.” For good measure, they even point to Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* as the bible of that religious-political amalgam.

When the renowned psychologist of religion William James was asked in 1904, “What do you mean by ‘spirituality?’” he responded: “Susceptibility to ideals, but with a certain freedom to indulge in imagination about them. A certain amount of ‘otherworldly’ fancy.” That is the kind of whimsical, individualistic answer that would have earned James no small amount of scorn from today’s cultural critics had they heard it from some supposed avatar of the New Age. Yet for all of James’s vaunted privatizing of religion—he defined it, for his purposes, as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude”—he always remained very much interested in the fruits of faith, the inner resources of saintliness. What kinds of interior lives produced the energy and dedication of the saints, “their extravagance of human tenderness”? Without some sense of the spirit’s vast potentialities, James wondered, how would Americans ever confront their “material attachments” and regain “the moral fighting shape”? “Naturalistic optimism,” he wrote, “is mere syllabub and flattery and sponge-cake” compared with the hopes and demands that the spiritual life was capable of fostering. A Whitmanite individualist, James allowed the churches no monopoly on mystical experience or social conscience; a wide-awake pragmatist, he also believed that liberals and progressives turned away from the spiritual at their own peril. On both points Senator Obama apparently concurs, and there’s nothing “soft-core,” “softheaded,” or “sponge-cake” about that. □