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The Bookshelf

FAITHS, CULTS AND SECTS OF AMERICA

FAITHS, CULTS AND SECTS OF AMERICA.

By Richard Mathison. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, \$5.00

The dust cover of this book makes clear that it is "an encyclopedic account of America's religious cults." Written in a crisp and easy-flowing style, "Faith, Cults and Sects of America" is an example of well-covered journalistic reporting as far as it goes. The author tries, however, to cover too much ground in too little space. The result is a breezy superficiality which neither assesses the significance of the phenomena discussed nor presents an adequate description of the various religious groups which form the basis for this book.

One good example of this is Baha'i faith. In this small compass Mr. Mathison hastily explains the origins of the Baha'i religion and does little else. Admittedly, Baha'i is not a tremendous force in American religious life; but it has adherents in 275 countries, is organized into a coherent world-wide religious framework. It has a well developed creed, a significant policy toward the United Nations, an exemplary code of social conduct which are worthy of some attention. All of this, the author either fails to mention or passes over lightly. By contrast, he devotes five times as much to a rather detailed outline of the religious, social and sex behavior of Aleister Crowley, the founder of Crowleyanity. Yet, Mr. Crowley's influence upon American life was never worth mentioning. It was also disgusting and quite transient. But whether one likes it or not, this is the kind of material which will titillate the intellectual hunger of those who find the ordinary book on religion too soporific. Perhaps, this is the reason for Mr. Mathison's pervasive emphasis upon the charlatanry and skullduggery of many minority religious groups.

All in all, one may say that this book undertakes an unduly large order in trying to explain forty-odd religious beliefs including those propounded by Daddy Grace, Zen Buddhism, the

Seventh-Day Adventists, and Psychianists. Added to this, there is a 50-page historical and analytical introduction. Under the circumstances, it is no wonder that this book seems far less than what might have been hoped for. At any rate, this is something which the reader can judge for himself.