

# Everywhere yet Nowhere: Histories of Religion in Iowa

ANDREW KLUMPP

EVERYWHERE YET NOWHERE. In Iowa history, religion is often both. Religion is a consistent underlying topic in Iowa history with clerics, believers, and faith communities often playing central roles in our state's story. Shared beliefs have helped to bind communities together, motivate political action, and make sense of new social and cultural movements. Yet for over fifty years, historians of Iowa have rarely studied religion directly and historians of religion have largely overlooked the state.<sup>1</sup>

The major exceptions to this observation, of course, have been histories written by religious communities themselves—most often local and denominational histories. Faith communities in Iowa have published thousands of local histories over the past 175 years. These abundant anniversary books, local celebrations, and congregational histories provide excellent primary sources for doing religious history, yet they are rarely aimed at broader audiences.<sup>2</sup>

Denominational histories, though less abundant than they once were, outline some basic contours of religious communities, most often from a sympathetic, insider's perspective. The earliest histories of religion in

---

1. In his 1993 survey of Iowa history, Marvin Bergman noted a lack of religious history subjects. Modest progress has been made since that time. Marvin Bergman, "The Annals of Iowa, 1947–1992 and Beyond: An Editor's Reflections," *Annals of Iowa* 52 (1993), 86. Since the inception of the Benjamin Shambaugh Award for the most significant book in Iowa history in 1988, only three books focused explicitly on religious subjects have won the award: Cynthia Grant Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880–1930* (Boston, 1990); Robert F. Martin, *Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862–1935* (Bloomington, IN, 2002); and Steven Avella, *The Catholic Church in Southwest Iowa: A History of the Diocese of Des Moines* (Collegetown, MN, 2018).

2. David Zwart demonstrates the myriad ways local histories act as primary sources in his recent article on mid-twentieth century rural Iowa. Zwart, "Telling Heartland Histories: Rural Iowa Protestant Congregations in the Mid-Twentieth Century," *Annals of Iowa* 77 (2018), 384–415.

Iowa were these denominational histories. Methodists, for example, produced several histories of their circuit riders' journeys throughout the state. G.W. Brindell's 1887 article "Early Methodism in Iowa" was among the earliest, and throughout the early twentieth century, several books, articles, and pamphlets told the history of Methodists in Iowa.<sup>3</sup> Episcopalians, Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and other Christian denominations also undertook similar regional or statewide projects during this era.<sup>4</sup> These studies were largely written for insiders, which often narrowed the historical analysis, and they rarely extended beyond Christian traditions. A series of *Palimpsest* issues in the 1950s highlighted many mainline Protestant denominations, particularly Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Baptists, as well as Mennonites.<sup>5</sup>

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Community of Christ (formerly Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) have demonstrated a sustained interest in their history in Iowa. The Mormons' flight across Iowa on their way to the Salt Lake Valley has received frequent attention.<sup>6</sup> The long history of the

---

3. G.W. Brindell, "Early Methodism in Iowa," *Iowa Historical Record* 3 (1887), 516–18. For example, see Aaron Watson Haines, *The Makers of Iowa Methodism: A Twentieth-Century Memorial of the Pioneers* (Cincinnati, 1900); Bennett Mitchell, *History of the Northwest Iowa Conference, 1873–1903* (Sioux City, 1904); Stephen Norris Fellows, *History of the Upper Iowa Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1856–1906* (Cedar Rapids, 1907); Ruth Gallaher, "The First Church in Iowa," *Palimpsest* 7 (1926), 1–10; Ruth Gallaher, *A Century of Methodism in Iowa, 1844–1944* (Mount Vernon, 1944).

4. "Early Days in Iowa," *Iowa Churchman* 26 (1902), 10–12 (Episcopalian); Matthias M. Hoffmann, *Church Founders of the Northwest: Loras and Cretin and other Captains of Christ* (Milwaukee, 1937) (Catholic); George Zeilinger, *A Missionary Synod with a Mission: A Memoir for the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Iowa and other States* (Chicago, 1929); John Frederick Hinkhouse, ed., *One Hundred Years of the Iowa Presbyterian Church* (Cedar Rapids, 1932); Truman O. Douglass, *The Pilgrims of Iowa* (Boston, 1911) (Congregationalist).

5. Ruth Gallaher, "The Methodists in Iowa," *Palimpsest* 32 (1951), 57–120; Frederick I. Kuhns, "The Presbyterians in Iowa," *Palimpsest* 33 (1952), 97–128; Millington Farwell Carpenter, "The Episcopal Church in Iowa," *Palimpsest* 34 (1953), 433–80; Albert A. Jagnow, Gerhard Ottersberg, and Mary Qualley, "Some Iowa Lutheran Centennials," *Palimpsest* 35 (1954), 231–60; Frederick Irving Kuhns, "The Baptists in Iowa," *Palimpsest* 36 (1955), 333–88; Melvin Gingerich, "The Mennonites in Iowa," *Palimpsest* 40 (1959), 161–224.

6. Jacob Van der Zee, *The Mormon Trails in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1914); William J. Petersen, "Mormon Trails in Iowa," *Palimpsest* 37 (1956), 513–44; Lida L. Greene, "Markers for Remembrance: The Mormon Trail," *Annals of Iowa* 40 (1970), 190–93; Joseph E. Brown, *The Mormon Trek West* (New York, 1980); Susan Easton

Community of Christ in Iowa has also been studied extensively.<sup>7</sup> More recently, historians like Brady G. Winslow have also started to examine how Iowans perceived and interacted with Mormons during their sojourn on the Illinois side of the Mississippi.<sup>8</sup>

The religious communities that have garnered the most attention, particularly from historians outside of the communities themselves, are the Amish and the Amana Colonies. These two distinct communities perhaps most clearly exemplify how religion is intimately connected to histories of economics, culture, agriculture, community life, and immigration in Iowa. The deeply religious nature of both Iowa's Amish communities and the Amana Colonies means that histories about them have necessarily involved rich engagement with members' faith.<sup>9</sup>

While local and denominational histories continued to appear throughout the twentieth century, historians of religion increasingly embraced methods that did not assume a shared religious worldview, and many other academic historians moved away from state and midwestern history.<sup>10</sup> For the past fifty years, the religious history of Iowa

---

Black and William G. Hartley, eds., *The Iowa Mormon Trail: Legacy of Faith and Courage* (Orem, UT, 1997); William G. Hartley, "Mormons and Early Iowa History (1838 to 1858): Eight Distinct Connections," *Annals of Iowa* 59 (2003), 217–60; Richard Bennett, *Mormons at the Missouri* (Norman, OK, 2004).

7. See, for instance, Roger D. Launius, "The Mormon Quest for a Perfect Society at Lamoni, Iowa, 1870–1890," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (1984), 325–42; Paul M. Edwards, *Our Legacy of Faith: A Brief History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Independence, MO, 1991); Danny Jorgensen, "The Scattered Saints of Southwestern Iowa: Cutlerite-Josephite Conflict and Rivalry, 1855–1865," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 13 (1993), 80–98;

8. Brady G. Winslow, "David W. Kilbourne: The Creation of an Iowa Anti-Mormon," *Annals of Iowa* 78 (2019), 241–67.

9. Bertha M. H. Shambaugh, "Amana—In Transition," *Palimpsest* 17 (1936), 149–84, reprinted as "Amana That Was and Amana That Is," *Palimpsest* 31 (1950), 215–51; Melvin Gingerich, *The Mennonites in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1939); Barbara Selzer Yambura with Eunice W. Bodine, *A Change and A Parting: My Story of Amana* (Ames, 1960); Peter Hoehnle, *The Amana People: The History of a Religious Community* (Iowa City, 2003); Elmer Schwieder and Dorothy Schwieder, *A Peculiar People: Iowa's Old Order Amish* (Iowa City, 2009); "God's Chosen Sojourners: The Inspirationists of Amana, Iowa," in *Wandering Souls: Protestant Migrations in America, 1630–1865*, ed. Scott Rohrer (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010).

10. The decline of interest in state and midwestern history has been well documented. See Jon K. Lauck, *The Lost Region: Toward a Revival of Midwestern History* (Iowa City, 2013). Two useful essays for understanding broader trends in U.S. religious history are Jon Butler, "Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History," *Journal of American History* 90 (2004), 1357–78, and Kevin M. Schultz and Paul Harvey, "Everywhere and Nowhere: Recent Trends

has been perhaps most present as a part of larger studies of communities, movements, or institutions. For instance, understanding the religious commitments of immigrant communities is often essential to understanding a community's experience. Although Brian Beltman focused on Dutch settlement patterns and community development, his work also recognizes that shared religious commitments were a critical factor in Dutch communities. Cherilyn Walley has demonstrated that even among less religiously homogenous Welsh immigrants, churches were among the earliest institutions built by new arrivals. Even for more recent immigrant groups, such as the Tai Dam from Southeast Asia, religion has most often been studied as a part of a larger history rather than an independent topic for analysis.<sup>11</sup>

Few individual Iowans have received sustained study for their influence on religious history. The most significant exception is the teetotaling, former baseball star turned hard-hitting revivalist Billy Sunday. His influence on revivalism and the development of muscular Christianity has attracted the most attention from historians. Robert F. Martin's *Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862–1935* is the most recent scholarly biography of Sunday; however, numerous others appeared throughout the twentieth century and popular studies of Sunday have been published within the past decade.<sup>12</sup> Other prominent religious figures from Iowa, such as televangelist and Alton-native Robert Schuller of Crystal Cathedral fame, have received scant attention.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the religious lives of influential

---

in American Religious History and Historiography," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 (2010), 129–62.

11. Brian W. Beltman, "Ethnic Territoriality and the Persistence of Identity: Dutch Settlers in Northwest Iowa, 1869–1880," *Annals of Iowa* 55 (1996), 101–37; Cherilyn Walley, *The Welsh in Iowa* (Cardiff, UK, 2009); Matthew Walsh, *The Good Governor: Robert Ray and the Indochinese Refugees of Iowa* (Jefferson, NC, 2017).

12. Martin, *Hero of the Heartland*. For earlier studies, see William T. Ellis, *Billy Sunday: The Man and His Message* (Chicago, 1936); William G. McLoughlin Jr., *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name* (Chicago, 1955); David T. Morgan, "The Revivalist as Patriot: Billy Sunday and World War I," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 51 (1973), 376–84; Roger A. Bruns, *Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big-Time American Evangelism* (New York, 1992); W. A. Firstenberger, *In Rare Form: A Pictorial History of Baseball Evangelist Billy Sunday* (Iowa City, 2005); Craig A. Bishop, *Billy Sunday, the Baseball Evangelist: The Story of a Remarkable Life, 1862–1935* (Collierville, TN, 2016).

13. Dennis Voskuil's *Mountains into Goldmines: Robert Schuller and the Gospel of Success* (Grand Rapids, 1983) does not emphasize Schuller's youth and young adulthood in Iowa. More recently, Kate Bowler's acclaimed histories *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York, 2014) and *The Preacher's Wife:*

Iowans like Carrie Chapman Catt, Henry A. Wallace, or Norman Borlaug would make worthy subjects. Wallace's idiosyncratic religious beliefs, for example, are most directly discussed in relation to political scandal in his most recent biography, yet they merit study in their own right.<sup>14</sup>

If Iowa historians tend to overlook religion, American religious historians often ignore Iowa and the Midwest. Despite Laurie Maffly-Kipp's pathbreaking essay, "Eastward Ho!: American Religion from the Perspective of the Pacific Rim," New England continues to loom large, though the South and the Sun Belt also receive significant attention.<sup>15</sup> Renown historian of religion Jon Butler has noted that the Midwest boasts a particularly diverse spiritual landscape, suggesting it was and possibly still is the most religiously diverse region of the country.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, major trends in the field's historiography—evangelicalism, twentieth century politics, race, internationalism, and pluralism—could be richly studied in Iowa.<sup>17</sup> Yet historians of religion have consistently looked elsewhere.

Despite this disinterest, American religious historians have much to gain from the study of Iowa. As the profession grapples with a major reexamination of the term "evangelical," Iowa's religious communities

---

*The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities* (Princeton, 2019) make only passing reference to Schuller, his wife Arvella, and their connections to Iowa.

14. John C. Culver and John Hyde, *American Dreamer: A Life of Henry A. Wallace* (New York, 2000).

15. Laurie Maffly-Kipp, "Eastward Ho!: American Religion from the Perspective of the Pacific Rim," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas Tweed (Berkeley, 1997). Claudio Saunt examines the Northeast's dominance in early American history and offers compelling suggestions that could also be applied to the Midwest. Saunt, "Go West: Mapping Early American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly* 65 (2008), 745–78.

16. Jon Butler, "The Midwest's Spiritual Landscape," in *Finding a New Midwestern History*, eds. Jon Lauck, Gleaves Whitney, and Joseph Hogan (Lincoln, NE, 2018), 196–210. A key study of the Midwest's religious history is Philip Barlow and Mark Silk, eds., *Religion and Public Life in the Midwest: America's Common Denominator?* (Lanham, MD, 2004). Robert Wuthnow has also written extensively on religion in the Midwest. Two notable books are *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s* (Princeton, 2011) and *Red State Religion: Faith and Politics in America's Heartland* (Princeton, 2012).

17. See, for example, Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York, 2014); Daniel Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Religious Right* (New York, 2010); Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York, 2016); Emily Conroy-Krutz, *Christian Imperialism: Converting the World in the Early American Republic* (Ithaca, NY, 2015); Michael Altman, *Heathen, Hindoo, Hindu: American Representations of India, 1721–1893* (New York, 2017).

could play an important role in complicating this term.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the many mega-church or upstart evangelical communities studied over the past two decades, Iowa's evangelical communities often emerged from (and stayed rooted in) established Christian communities. Furthermore, Tom Witosky and Marc Hansen discussed the role of evangelicals in the Iowa Supreme Court retention votes following the Court's 2009 *Varnum v. Brien* decision that legalized same-sex marriage in Iowa; however, the relationship between religion and politics in Iowa history merits further examination. This is especially true given the abundant and often sweeping national histories of religion and politics. In another sign of potential for the field, in 2020, four Iowa-based scholars received a regional development grant from the American Academy of Religion to develop a workshop for scholars of American religion in Iowa to "support the academic study of American religious history and culture at Iowa universities and to foster the public understanding of religion in Iowa."<sup>19</sup> This workshop convenes in the spring of 2022 and may prove a boon for new work on religious histories of Iowa.

The study of religion in Iowa, with few exceptions, has focused on Christianity. Works by Michael Bell and, more recently, Shari Rabin have looked seriously at Judaism in Iowa, and Bill Douglas has offered fresh and important insights on religious pluralism in the state.<sup>20</sup> The connection between religion and immigration is a strength of Iowa history. There are important opportunities to study how religion has affected the immigrant experience of newer groups to Iowa, such as arrivals from Asia,

---

18. See Iowa-native Kristen Kobes Du Mez's *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York, 2021); Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2021); Mark Noll, David Bebbington, and George Mardsen, eds., *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* (Grand Rapids, 2019).

19. "2020–21 Regional Development Grant Winners," American Academy of Religion (website), 9/1/2020, <https://aarweb.org/AARMBR/Publications-and-News-/Newsroom-/News-/September-2020/2020-2021-Regional-Development-Grant-Winners.aspx>.

20. Michael Bell, "'True Israelites of America': The Story of Jews in Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 53 (1994), 85–127; Shari Rabin, "'A Nest to a Wandering Bird': Iowa and the Creation of American Judaism," *Annals of Iowa* 73 (2014), 101–27; Bill Douglas, "Making Iowa Safe for Differences: Barnstorming Iowa on Behalf of Religious Tolerance, 1936–1943," *Annals of Iowa* 75 (2016), 234–59. The earliest history of Judaism in Iowa was Simon Glazer's *The Jews of Iowa* (Des Moines, 1904). Another early survey of Iowa's Jewish community is Jack Seymour Wolfe's *A Century with Iowa Jewry* (Des Moines, 1941).

Africa, and South America. And, despite Iowa's Muslim community dating back to the 1890s, very little has been written about it.

Iowa's religious history has much to offer not only historians of Iowa but also American religious historians. New opportunities to study the religious history of non-Christian communities, non-English speaking communities, and to draw on the thousands of primary sources squirreled away in local churches, meeting halls, and libraries gesture toward the riches that await historians who are willing to take up the challenge. It is also long past time for a rigorous monograph on Iowa's complex religious history. Iowa's religious history is everywhere, and there are signs that with renewed attention, it will be easier to find.

## Iowa's History of Gender at 175: A Brief Survey

SARA EGGE

CHARLOTTA GORDON PYLES lived a remarkable life. Born in Kentucky in 1804 to an enslaved father of German and African descent and a Seminole mother, Pyles eventually married Harry MacHenry Pyles, an enslaved man trained to repair harnesses and horseshoes. When the man who enslaved Charlotta died, he made his daughter promise to free his slaves. She fulfilled her promise, moving most of Pyles's family from Kentucky to Keokuk, Iowa. Two of Charlotta's sons-in-law remained in bondage, however, so in 1853 she raised \$3,000 to secure their freedom by completing a speaking tour, befriending people like abolitionist Frederick Douglass and suffragist Susan B. Anthony.<sup>1</sup>

Histories about people like Charlotta Pyles complicate assumptions about how Iowans understood gender as a marker of identity and a system built on negotiations of power. Since the 1980s, most scholarship on gender in Iowa has explored the topic within existing historiographical narratives, such as European and American settlement, agricultural development, and the growth of small towns. On the one hand, this scholarship challenged narratives that had largely left out gendered analyses, criticizing narrow assumptions that heteropatriarchal

---

1. Terry Altheide, "Charlotta Pyles," *Daily Gate City*, 1/29/2016; Ray Garrison, *Goodbye, My Keokuk Lady* (n. p., 1962).