

Religion in the Modern American West, by Ferenc Morton Szasz

reviewed by [David Yoo](#) in the [December 12, 2001](#) issue

From the vistas of Albuquerque, where for three decades he has taught intellectual history at the University of New Mexico, Ferenc Morton Szasz has set his sights on exploring a subject neglected by many historians of America's West: religion. He laments that even the "new" Western history that has reinvigorated the study of the region has had very little to say about the important part religion has played in the story. This book counters the trend in the work on the region and in the historical profession as a whole by asking what people, institutions and themes emerge when religion is placed at the center of the story.

The book's great strength is that Szasz's wide-angle lens gives readers a sampling of what residents have known all along, that religion and spirituality have been and continue to be very much at the core of western life. On the broad canvas of the 20th century, Szasz sketches an array of scenes, taking us on pilgrimages to different locales to glimpse how religious leaders, movements and organizations have helped shape and define communities. Rabbi William Friedman's Denver synagogue or the welfare system of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints or the work of the Little Brothers of the Good Shepherd in the Southwest each, in its own way and time, has represented a presence and influence that has extended well beyond the walls of particular institutions.

Szasz argues that a secular vision of the West misses the fact that religious institutions such as schools and hospitals have played an integral part in the development of countless areas. Moreover, religion and spirituality have been key to how many men and women, families and communities have ordered and given meaning to their worlds. The author grounds his discussion in the larger contexts of particular people and places. He gives example after example of how a religious sensibility opens up the past in ways that complicate standard labels or categories such as "politics." Utah and Mormonism constitute a prominent case in point, but there are many others as well.

While most readers will appreciate Szasz's efforts to touch upon the tremendous diversity of religion in the modern West, they may wish that his study had more depth. For instance, the Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco and its pastor, Cecil Williams, are featured in the book, and Szasz makes passing references to the amazing web of city life that the church and its leadership have managed to become part of. But since Szasz devotes only three pages to the church, his analysis of religion's role as a critical player in the city cannot help but be superficial. It is precisely because Szasz is attempting to counter the assumption that religion has been largely absent that his minimalist approach is frustrating. Trying to chronicle religion in the West in one slim volume was no doubt a daunting task. But focusing on fewer cases might have yielded more insight.

Szasz makes an important contribution to the historical literature of the region by underscoring its marginalization of religion and by trying to correct that marginalization. Those especially interested in Judeo-Christian religious leaders and institutions will find this book helpful as a background and an entry point that can lead to further study. One can only hope that it will signal a turn toward giving religion its proper due in the study of history.