

The New Criterion

Features

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Religion in America: ancient & modern

by [David B. Hart](#)

On the distinctive state of religion in America. The seventh of our series “Lengthened shadows: America and Its Institutions in the Twenty-first Century.”

All culture arises out of religion. When religious faith decays, culture must decline, though often seeming to flourish for a space after the religion which has nourished it has sunk into disbelief. . . no cultured person should remain indifferent to erosion of apprehension of the transcendent.
—Russell Kirk, *Eliot and His Age*

The herdsman who comes to Pentheus from Mount Cithaeron, in *The Bacchae*, tells how the Theban women possessed by Dionysus take up serpents without being bitten and fire without being burned. It is not unlikely, given how common such phenomena are in "enthusiast" and "ecstatic" religion, that here and elsewhere Euripides grants us some glimpse of the actual Dionysiac orgy, even long after its migration into Greece from Thrace, when the cult had been assumed into the soberer mysteries of the Olympians.

And other features of the rite, reporte ...

David B. Hart's most recent book is *Atheist Delusions* (Yale).

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