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PBS' \"God in America\"

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 12, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

PBS began its four-part documentary, ?God in America,? last night and it was better than I expected. Oftentimes, the mainstream media takes on religion in a very superficial way, considering religion as ?the Easter Bunny with real estate? as a journalist friend once said, but the producers of the show went beyond the surface. The rest of the series will air each of the next three nights and, hopefully, will maintain the standard established last night.

One of the best parts of last night?s show was that the experts they lined up explained how America?s individualism was not derived exclusively from the Enlightenment, but was born of the religious, and specifically Protestant, impulses of the colonial culture. They used the example of Anne Hutchinson?s challenge to the Puritan establishment of John Winthrop to demonstrate the tension that exists in American Protestantism between its devotion to the individual?s direct access to the Scripture and the conformity to established norms derived by the dominant culture from those same Scriptures. The issues may have changed, but the debate itself was at the heart of the contemporary debate about health care reform.

They had a strong segment on George Whitefield, and how he both accentuated the individualism of religious experience by preaching his ?new birth,? and the way Whitefield jettisoned the Puritan insistence on rational theology in favor of a more emotive religious experience, a point well made by Yale historian Harry Stout, whose commentaries are always worth hearing or reading. The program did not delineate the specifically anti-Catholic attitudes that were part of the inspiration for the American Revolution but it did a great job examining anti-Catholic prejudice in a lengthy segment of Archbishop John Hughes and his fight for equal treatment of Catholic schools in New York. As historian Stephen Prothero said, for some Americans, ?Catholicism threatens the whole American project.?

There is always more that could be said on the topic of religion, and having to condense the story into only eight hours is an impossible task. Of course, in the world of TV, right hours is an eternity, so hats off to PBS for taking on this most central aspect of American life and, so far, handling the subject with skill and insight.

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