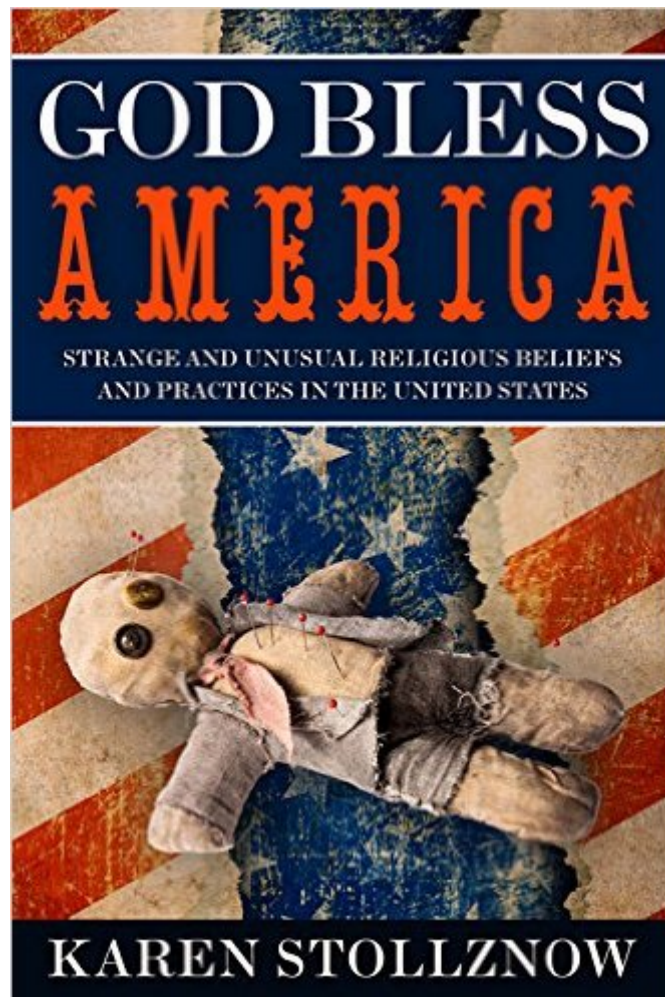


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God Bless America: Strange And Unusual Religious Beliefs And Practices In The United States



Synopsis

God Bless America lifts the veil on strange and unusual religious beliefs and practices in the modern-day United States. Do Satanists really sacrifice babies? Do exorcisms involve swearing and spinning heads? Are the Amish allowed to drive cars and use computers? Offering a close look at snake handling, new age spirituality, Santeria spells, and satanic rituals, this book offers more than mere armchair research. It takes you to an exorcism, a Charismatic church and a Fundamentalist Mormon polygamist compound. You will sit among the beards and bonnets in a Mennonite church, hear the sounds of silence at a Quaker meeting, and listen to L. Ron Hubbard's sci-fi stories told as sermons during a Scientology service. From the Amish to Voodoo, the beliefs and practices explored in this book may be unorthodox, and often dangerous, but they are always fascinating. Some of them are dying out, while others are gaining popularity with a modern audience, but all offer insight into the past, present and future of religion in the United States.

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Customer Reviews

Ever wanted to find out what's really going on with the more...unusual religious and spiritual practices in the United States? It seems to me as though the best way to see a set of beliefs and practices is to view it as an outsider -- but doing that from the perspective of a rival faith tradition carries its own dangers, hence the need for a book like this in the American discourse on religion, religious belief, religious privilege, and this needs saying as well, the dangers involved in some religious beliefs and practices. Beliefs are not neutral, as they guide our actions, as we base those

on what we hold to be true to better their potential for success. Some beliefs are dangerous to the practitioners, some to those they persecute because of those beliefs, while some belief practices, such as violent exorcisms, can cause injury or death in those alleged to be possessed. Stollznow's book, *God Bless America*, puts these into focus, with one of the most objective treatments of the subject I've seen to date. Compare this with Ravi Zacharias' "Kingdom of the Cults," and similar works written by religious apologists currently in print. The first chapter, *Modern-Day Prophets and Polygamists: Fundamentalist Mormons*, describes the extreme branches of the Mormon Church, those not considered by the more mainline LDS Church to be true Mormons, but which consider themselves to be that very thing. Some of the early history of Mormonism that gave rise to these breakaway sects, or from which they lay claim to legitimacy, is explained, and their controversial practices and lives revealed with no small amount of scrutiny.

I have picked up things here and there but there are still things I can't wrap my head around when it comes to the different religions and their beliefs. But religion doesn't interest me enough to make a deep study of it like my father-in-law. What I need? Something to give me the basic facts so I don't ask my Mennonites, New Age and Christian friends ignorant questions. Luckily a person like me can turn to Karen Stollznow's *God Bless America: Strange and Unusual Religious Beliefs and Practices in the United States*. Yes, that title is certainly a mouthful. But the book itself is easily digestible with chapters covering everything from Fundamentalist Mormons, Amish and Mennonites, New Agers, Satanists, Quakers and more. Each chapter blends a history/breakdown of said religion's beliefs and experiences Karen Stollznow and her husband Matthew had in interactions with the believers. There is a part in *Signs, Wonders and Miracles* chapter (about Charismatics and Pentecostals) that had me darting into the living room and re-enacting Matthew's session with the Charismatic "healers" complete with a stuffed cat filling in for Matthew. Thanks to *God Bless America: Strange and Unusual Religious Beliefs and Practices in the United States*, I now know what an Anabaptist is and sorry Conradin from Saki's excellent and chilling short story "Sredni Vashtar", an Anabaptist isn't as thrilling and wicked as it sounds. I've also found out the differences between Amish and Mennonites. No stupid questions about why some Mennonites use computers and others doesn't from me! Would I recommend *God Bless America: Strange and Unusual Religious Beliefs and Practices in the United States*? Certainly!

When I grew up in the Presbyterian Church, we were given a slim little paperback book about the various religious cults and what they believed. We had all heard about the Mormons, the

Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientology, and Christian Science, but as naïve high school kids, we knew nothing about them. It was truly an eye-opener to read all about their strange beliefs, as the book preached why they were wrong and why the Presbyterians were right. At no point did the book turn the mirror on itself, and examine the weird ideas espoused by the Presbyterians and other mainstream Christians. Then, when I began to study comparative religions in college, I encountered a totally different perspective: the detailed (and often dry) scholarly dissection of world religions. These books were often massive, and included huge detailed sections on the mythologies and core beliefs that soon became overwhelming. It was eye opening to see what other religions reveal about the religion you grew up with, but it was also a lot of hard work. Between these two approaches is Karen Stollznow's lively book, *God Bless America*. It strikes the perfect tone between these extremes. It takes an outsider's view of American religions, as do most religious scholars, without hundreds of pages of tedious details to read through. Yet it also critiques these religions, and comments on the more absurd parts of their theology and belief systems, something that my little Sunday School book also did—but without the commitment to Presbyterianism. It is written in a wry, lively style, often poking gentle fun at the sublime silliness of some beliefs (and the fact that their practitioners see no irony or absurdity in their beliefs).

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