



The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus (Religion in America)

David Burns

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In this cultural and intellectual history, David Burns contends that the influence of biblical criticism in America was more widespread than has been thought. Burns proves this point by uncovering the hidden history of the radical historical Jesus, a construct created and sustained by freethinkers, feminists, socialists, and anarchists during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. The result of this exploration is a new narrative revealing that Cyrenus Ward, Caroline Bartlett, George Herron, Bouck White, and other radical religionists had an impact on the history of religion in America rivaling that of recognized religious intellectuals such as Shailer Mathews, Charles Briggs, Francis Peabody, and Walter Rauschenbusch.

The methods utilized by radical religionists were different from those employed by elite liberal divines, however, and part of a larger struggle over the relationship between religion and civilization. There were numerous reasons for this conflict, but Burns argues that the primary cause was that key radical religionists used Ernest Renan's *The Life of Jesus* to create an imaginative brand of biblical criticism that struck a balance between the demands of reason and the doctrines of religion. And this measured approach allowed Robert Ingersoll, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Eugene Debs, and other secular-minded thinkers who sought to purge Christianity of its supernatural dimensions to still find something wonderful in the religious imagination and make common cause with an ancient peasant from Galilee.

This provocative blend of reason and religion produced a vibrant countercultural movement that spanned communities, classes, and creeds and makes *The Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus* a book that deserves a wide readership in an era when public intellectuals and politicians on both the left and right draw rigid lines between the secular and the sacred.

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