

1905: The Burning of St. Thomas and  
the Crisis of Religion in Modern Manhattan

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I - St Thomas's disastrous fire of Aug. 9, 1905.

II - St. Thomas's fire occurred amidst NYC's religious crisis deeply embedded in crises caused by urbanization and modernization - 1880s into 1910s

urbanization and the loss of traditional face-to-face rural community

1888 NYC Protestant conference exposed whole neighborhoods without churches

modernization — rise of bureaucracies, challenge of science to Biblical truth  
result summarized by German sociologist Max Weber — "the disenchantment of the world"

rampant, incomprehensible religious pluralism - brought by immigrants but also by new American religious movements

III - Yet between 1880 and 1950 Manhattan — the capital of American secularism — led a religious renaissance by embracing modernization rather than rejecting it.

A. Denominations adopted "business methods" for congregations and denominations

demanded more training for both clergy and laity - accounting, planning

B. Denominations flooded Manhattan with religious sanctuaries

complex financing, sanctuaries easily bought and sold, denominations become real estate mavens

St. Thomas Church, which opened in 1870 and burned in 1905, previewed Manhattan's many large sanctuaries - capped by the massive St. Patrick's Cathedral dedicated in 1879

small sanctuaries rented by month or year

hotels rented ballrooms and meeting rooms for religious services

C. Women transformed the internal life of congregations

women not yet ordained in most American denominations

but comprised 60% of most church/synagogue membership

Catholic women in orders outnumbered priests 2&3 to 1 - provided full teaching staff for most Catholic parish schools

Protestant Sunday Schools overwhelmingly taught by women

women organized and ran increasing numbers of mission, literary, activity groups inside congregations among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews alike

D. Manhattan deepened its stature as a hotbed of religious publishers

long a center for religious publishing - deepened and broadened after 1880

American Bible Society - formed in Manhattan in 1816

*Christian Herald* — originated in 1878 in Manhattan, by 1900 America's largest Protestant weekly journal

Two Manhattan firms dominated Protestant publishing from 1890s into 1930s  
Fleming H. Revel and George Doran

by 1930s major secular publishers discovered market in religious books —  
Dodd Mead, Harper & Row, MacMillan, and Doubleday

E. Manhattan became a 20th century American spiritual hothouse. Between 1920 and 1950 no other city, state, or region matched Manhattan's primacy in reshaping American notions about religion in Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism alike.

Reinhold Niebuhr — Paul Tillich — Adam Clayton Powell Sr & Jr.

Jacques Maritain — Dorothy Day

Abraham Heschel — Joseph Soloveitchik — Mordecai Kaplan

Norman Vincent Peale