The Passion According to Henry

The pith and purity of his prejudices, the grit and grace of his language, the dazzle and buck of his outrage: Does it really matter what H. L. Mencken attacked? Politics, literature, culture? We read him now as we have always read him, to see how and how hard he hits whatever he targets. When it comes to religion, Mencken’s view of Christian science is not much different from his view of, say, evangelicalism. "Sewers of superstition," he calls them all—for practice and practitioner. For Mencken, those who think the divine intercedes in or rules human affairs are boobs whose "sin" is not belief but the piety with which their belief is lacquered.

S. T. Joshi’s anthology, *H. L. Mencken on Religion*, brings together 70 like-biled excoriations from Mencken’s most fertile period—as editor of the *Smart Set*, 1914 to 1923, and the *American Mercury*, till 1933. Most of the essays here fall within a 12-year frame, squarely on the Coolidge and Hoover years. In 1925, Mencken reached fever pitch in a series of editorialized dispatches (the former effacing the latter) while covering the Scopes trial. A quarter of this collection concerns that trial with Mencken flaying small-minded Dayton, Tennessee, and the "Fundamentalist
Pope,” William Jennings Bryan.

Joshi’s introduction is superb and his skill as an organizer is top-notch. But to traverse the territory of Mencken’s opinions one will endure much scenery and much repetition. As the book works through its nine headings, among them, "religion and science" and "the beliefs of an iconoclast," its progress is static, like a Baroque opera—too much recitative and too few arias. This is not a criticism of Joshi. Rather, it says that the dragon of religious doctrine, mixed up with Mencken’s pen over 300 pages, is no match for the lance of Saint Henry. Thus, a one-dimensionality is inescapable because the butt of Mencken’s ire was itself one-dimensional. The "bilge of Idealism," in religion or politics, is drubbed dozens of times, as in this example: "The question before us is a practical one: how are we to get through life with a maximum of entertainment and a minimum of pain? I believe that the answer lies . . . in ridding solemn ponderosities of their solemn ponderosity."

Pure Mencken. To expose and ridicule religion’s love affair with itself. And yet I often find him disinclined to ply the skepticism he so values, to analyze religious corruptibility with more complexity than a swift kick in the groin. Don’t get me wrong. To think that someone and his or her ideas received those kicks is exhilarating. But I also love it when Mencken essays, when he develops his antipathies with post-fight analysis, even reflection. Those pieces—and there are many—are worth savoring.

Mencken is most aggravated by Christianity and its seamy intersections with politics, society, civilization—every stall in the intellectual agora. Joshi states Mencken’s prime directive: "The inveterate tendency of religion to seek the enforcement of its views by the power of the government." In "Democracy and Theocracy" Mencken writes that America has "always diluted" these two principles. He links the pair by noting that all wars are "fought to hymn tunes," all political campaigns wage "witch-hunts," and a then-current race for president (1928, the Protestant-supported Hoover v. the Catholic, Al Smith) comes down to "whether one gang of these holy men shall continue to run the country, or whether they shall be unhorsed and another gang put in their place."

The wonder of this essay is that nothing of its stripe exists before Mencken wrote it. A marvel of criticism, he weaves as well as greases the rope by which religion and government are tied. But his system of delivery is the thing we value most, its bombast and honesty, as he uses over-statement and the occasional generous turn.
In "Homo Neandertalensis," Mencken gets categorical while defending the risks enlightened people, "the educated minority," take to ameliorate our condition. "Every step in human progress, from the first feeble stirrings in the abyss of time, has been opposed by the great majority of men." A layer cake of exaggeration—that "every step" has been countered and that the masses were around during molecular evolution opposing that, too. And yet, over-reaching the point may force the mob and its mountebanks to notice. Which is Mencken’s point. And then, contrariwise, he can mix amiety with enmity to great effect. In "Democracy and Theocracy," he wishes the "band of prehensile theologians" well and protests "every effort to dispose of" America’s religious differences. Mencken realizes that divorcing one’s adversaries is out of the question. You stay married to your lesser halves, not only to keep fighting but to support their right to fight back. Mencken’s autocratic style is democratized at such moments and gains an added punch.

At times he can be less blustery. "Men become civilized, not in proportion to their willingness to believe"—as politicians and pastors would have us be—"but in proportion to their readiness to doubt." He can also hoist a smaller club. "Man will never be wholly civilized until he ceases to intrude his snout into the shy, mysterious, highly private recesses of his brother’s soul." Even Mencken seems to accept the notion of a soul, a place, if nothing else, where he can hear himself think.

When he can, we get his best writing. His "from the pew" observations of Billy Sunday, Aimée Semple McPherson, and Jennings Bryan differ, at bottom, only in the "flabbergasting caterwauling" of their preaching. But in these portraits Mencken’s assault is replaced by flesh and blood verity. His description of being peppered with Billy Sunday’s sweat is priceless. And in "Yearning Mountaineers’ Souls Need Reconversion Nightly, Mencken Finds," our man in Dayton describes a revival, halting the commentary long enough to let us see, hear and feel the animal magnetism that so disgusts him.

Bryan died days after his anti-evolution side prevailed in the Scopes trial. Mencken bids Bryan adieu with an acrid tone. "Bryan was a vulgar and common man, a cad undiluted. He was ignorant, bigoted, self-seeking, blatant and dishonest. His career brought him into contact with the first men of his time; he preferred the company of rustic ignoramuses." Mencken loads the other barrel. "He seemed only a poor clod like those around him, deluded by a childish theology, full of an almost pathological hatred of all learning, all human dignity, all beauty, all fine and noble things. He was a peasant come home to the dung-pile." Could your memory be any worse served than having Mencken deliver your eulogy?