In the decade after World War I, liberal Protestant leaders, executives of the American publishing industry, and other important cultural figures collaborated to promote the buying and reading of religious books in the United States. Aware of the psychic and spiritual dislocations wrought by mass culture, increasing consumerism, and the profusion of new scientific and theological knowledge, these cultural leaders sought to guide American moderns through these troubled times by offering their expertise in the field of religious reading. The various reading campaigns they crafted—Religious Book Week in the 1920s, the Religious Book Club, founded in 1927, and the Religious Books Round Table of the American Library Association—formed the basis of a thriving religious middlebrow culture that remained a central force in American cultural and religious life through the middle decades of the twentieth century. The clergy, seminary professors, publishers, librarians, booksellers, and critics who became the arbiters of this middlebrow culture sought to define a national spiritual center that would hold together a fragmenting society, create new markets for books, and maintain their privileged status in American religious discourse. What emerged were not only new structures for the promotion of reading, but also an enhanced emphasis on spiritual forms emerging from the margins of liberal Protestantism, especially mystical and psychological spiritualities. The Second World War brought about a significant new phase in the course of religious middlebrow culture. As political leaders declared “books as weapons in the war of ideas,” an interfaith organization, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, became the central broker of religious middlebrow reading, coordinating the massive, nationwide Religious Book Week campaign that ran from 1943 to 1948. This reading program built on the foundation of mystical and psychological spirituality formed in the 1920s and 1930s to encourage and facilitate interfaith exchange as the basis of modern American spirituality in the face of new ideological threats from abroad. These developments in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s laid the foundation for a culture of spiritual seeking that had lasting implications for middle-class American religious beliefs and practices for the remainder of the twentieth century.
The Jamesian emphasis on religious experience permeated American religious liberalism in the twentieth century and branched in a variety of directions. Some drew most heavily on James’s conception of “the religion of healthy-mindedness” and became what I call laissez-faire liberals. Historians of religion in America, themselves often personally committed to institutional Protestantism, have too often simply failed to see the vitality and dynamism of this “shadow culture” or “invisible religion” occurring beyond the walls of church life. The pluralist turn of American religious print culture by the 1940s further enhanced the importance of these alternative spiritualities.