

David W Fletcher, Spring 2003

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JON BUTLER'S *AWASH IN A SEA OF FAITH* &
CHRISTINE HEYRMAN'S *SOUTHERN CROSS*

Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Harvard University Press, 1990) and Christine Heyrman's *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997) survey the diverse religious processes at work in pre-Civil War America. Each author illuminates the nineteenth-century rise of a distinctive Christian hegemony, that is, "Southern evangelicalism" for Heyrman and "democratic Protestantism" for Butler. But, most prominently, Butler and Heyrman show the resistance to this evolution through countercurrents that refused to be part of an unpredictable, ongoing religious / political synthesis. As a result, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* and *Southern Cross* offer a subtle crescendo, a hermeneutic of power, that struggles to locate the sources and dynamics of religious prominence in American society.¹

In light of this, each writer's title does not seem to fit. In its classical Christian setting, the "cross" has little to do with powerfulness and much to do with brutal execution, violent suffering, and extreme powerlessness.² No doubt, this excepts later (i.e., during the Crusades) aggrandized use of the image of crucifixion on the basis of earlier existential reordering by writers like Paul who extolled the cross of Christ. Heyrman could have traced this

¹See the final chapter in each book: "Christian Power in the American Republic" (Butler's chapter nine) and "Mastery" (Heyrman's chapter five).

²See the brief study by Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, tr. John Bowden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977).

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transformation in early American religion, but nowhere does she develop this antithesis to classical meanings of crucifixion in its American expression. This is a striking omission in a work that aims to be about religious power relations and titles itself “Southern Cross.”³

Less problematic, but still not quite explicable, is Butler’s image of an oceanic flow of belief. Simply and broadly, his definition of “religion” is “belief in and resort to superhuman powers, sometimes beings, that determine the course of natural and human events” (3). As he shows, Old World beliefs and practices predisposed New World inhabitants toward more than just Christianity (i.e., magic and the occult). Further, the rationalism of some Congregationalists, Deists, and Unitarians, particularly among the early republic’s leaders, showed “tolerance of skepticism, perhaps even irreligion” (218). And, the “aloofness” or detachment of many Americans, such as Abraham Lincoln, from the institutions of Christianity reduced the “heterodox” nation to an “almost chosen people” (295). Butler’s research certainly indicates that, in spite of incessant waves and tides of religiosity, a large portion of the nation’s populace stayed well clear of the backwash.⁴

Regardless, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* and *Southern Cross* make significant contributions to the field of early American religious historiography. Butler for his part acknowledges the

³One could also quibble about Heyrman’s use of “southern,” since the geographical scope of her work includes “the western parts of Virginia and the Carolinas . . . Kentucky and Georgia . . . Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and Missouri, as well as the southern parts of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois” (8-9).

⁴Too, one might challenge Butler’s surmise of a general increase in religious involvement over time (i.e., “Christianization”) for which he depends on the conclusions of others (4).

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nation's "spiritual eclecticism" as a symptom of its marvelously "complex and bumptious" religious expressions (1). This exceedingly more complex religious past, rather than the usual view that "religion should have been weak, rather homogeneously evangelical, thoroughly uncoercive, and dominated by the direct descendants of Puritanism" (2), suggests for America's religious formation: (1) a lesser import for Puritanism; (2) an increased consequence to the eighteenth-century; (3) relevance of non-Christian beliefs and practices; (4) widespread use of coercion; (5) divine intervention as a recurrent theme; (6) a problematic relationship between slavery and Christianity; and (7) the "hothouse" growth of religion, including Christianity, after 1700.

To treat this historic record fairly, Butler dethrones ethical methodologies (i.e., Bronislaw Malinowski's *Magic, Science, and Religion*) that value religions according to their stage of evolutionary development. As a result, he levels the playing field, avoids hierarchical arrangement of religions, and develops a balanced and reasonable descriptive approach. He appropriately promotes "popular religion" as "the religious behavior of laypeople . . . defined by its clientele rather than by its theology, by its actors rather than by their acts" (4). He rightly emphasizes the role of transatlantic interaction ("a sine qua non," 5), a perspective that informed older studies but has been lacking woefully in more recent works on early American religion. But can Butler really stick to this method of investigation? By his own evaluation, "We do not know what we should about lay religion in Europe, and despite much cant about lay authority in America, we know surprisingly little about how it has fared in the society where the people were

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first declared sovereign” (4). Butler knows all too well that the vista of most pre-Civil War testimony comes from and trends toward society’s elite—the educated and the leaders.

But Butler takes the task in hand, and he does it very well. He notes the politics of the church-state problem, the “sacralized” physical landscape, the social mobility of dissenters, typical laity ambivalence toward certain Christian customs, and the syncretistic ways of necromancers. Such Old World aspects kept the fires of occult religion alive and affected organized Christianity’s “devolution” in the New World (51). Surely, Butler would do well to align this evidence against the backdrop of colonial population shifts and other demographic facts. Nevertheless, this delicate symbiosis of religious expressions and its replacement by an authoritarian Christianity is portrayed fittingly by the author. Adopting pragmatic revivalism, optimistic rationalism, and hierarchical denominational control, this rejuvenated pluralistic and republican Christianity left in its wake a failed Anglican establishment, an African spiritual holocaust, and a pessimistic and fatalistic Calvinism. Butler’s argument perhaps would be advantaged by greater contextual understanding—cultural, political, and social. Too, he is given to misstatement⁵ and is myopic somewhat in his reliance on the colony of Virginia and its Anglican establishment for his paradigms. Overall, however, the basic argument is sound, and

⁵Butler, for example, feels compelled to explain carefully his use of “holocaust” because of its explosive connotations (157). He also wrongly minimizes Tocqueville’s view of American religion when he says that “from Tocqueville’s perspective no lengthy or elaborate account was in order” (289). Compare Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Everyman’s Library, introduction by Alan Ryan (reprint; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), I: 300-318.

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Butler is quite generous to alternative interpretations especially when he explains “why” something happened.⁶

In very descriptive and story-telling fashion, Heyrman likewise weaves the tale of American evangelicalism.⁷ Her evangelicals, a motley mixture of Baptists and Methodists who undoubtedly “defy any easy classification” (255), stir up the devil, corral the youth, upset clannish bonds of family, lord it over the women, and gain mastery of patriarchal males—quite a feat for about a century of work. Like Butler, Heyrman sees superstitions and other ways of the Old World as intensely operative in nineteenth-century America. She validates the work of imperious religious leaders who reshape the American religious culture.⁸ And, she indicates the variety of religious beliefs (and disbeliefs) by a thorough look at evangelical penetration of and interference with life and culture in the South.

Often, however, Heyrman fails to discern purely biblical or religious motivations from political or social ones (i.e., concerning male headship and female subordination). Her topical

⁶Butler’s opulent reference to interpretive and primary sources in the text fascinates and enlightens. “Slavery and the African Spiritual Holocaust” reads like a mini historiographical essay, and “The Plural Origins of American Revivalism” shows historical “layers” associated with the Great Awakening in the 1740s, the 1840s, and the 1970s.

⁷Heyrman’s creative way of introducing an issue or a topic by telling a story parallels that of Ross Phares, *Bible in Pocket, Gun in Hand: The Story of Frontier Religion* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1964).

⁸One critique, though, is Heyrman’s little notice of theological and other incongruities that gradually differentiate Baptists and Methodists as the century progresses. This lessens greatly the coherency of “evangelical” for such variations. Contrast Butler who is very good on the impact of intra-denominational divisions, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 292.

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arrangement superbly illuminates her subject matter but has the drawback of not seeing things together, how one thing affects the other, and how chronology informs cause and effect. So by way of contrast with Butler whose strength is interpretation, Heyrman's strength rests in her canny ability to narrate graphically.⁹ She is a remarkable story-teller, so much so that it becomes hard to criticize her interpretations that are less than convincing.

⁹Heyrman leads the reader through her discussion and crescendos to a comprehensive synthesis in her "Epilogue" (253-260). She has chosen to write dramatically with a touch of flair. But issues that could have been made clear from the beginning are left in doubt until the end. This approach, while appealing to some, might distract others.