

## RELIGION IN JACKSONIAN AMERICA: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

The interpretation of religion during Jacksonian America, roughly 1815-1855, presents a whole set of challenging issues.<sup>1</sup> But three major developments that characterize the period deserve a brief explanation.<sup>2</sup> First, the country's population more than doubled from 1790 to 1820, and the nation's urban population reached almost two million in 1840. Irish and German immigrants plus the Mexican inhabitants of California, New Mexico, and Texas diversified the population ethnically. A sharp decline in the birth rate, especially among educated whites who were typically Protestant, also accelerated this ethnic variety. Such demographic transition predictably sparked serious religious tensions as changes in societal structures threatened beliefs that early nineteenth-century Americans inherited from their colonial and revolutionary ancestors.

Second, the nation's victory over Great Britain in the War of 1812 solidified its claim to sovereignty and increased its role in the international market economy. Industrialization skyrocketed with the attendant rise of financial operations, transportation facilities and modes, and manufacturing enterprises. New technology minimized labor requirements as the early champions of the factory system dealt a fatal blow to the bequeathed and quaint economy of

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<sup>1</sup>For the best comprehensive overview of American religion during this period, see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 385-632.

<sup>2</sup>See Peter N. Stearns, ed., *The Encyclopedia of World History: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Chronologically Arranged*, 6<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 599-600.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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independent crafts workers. By 1840, wage earners numbered about fifty percent of the nation's entire work force, so that many, now deprived of the benefits and dignity of their mastered skills, found it difficult if not impossible to either acquire property or advance socioeconomically. This negative spinoff from industrialization created great stress and led many to question the meaning of their existence within such a society. Religion and religious-type philosophical movements responded appropriately with answers of existential import to calm people's fears and redirect their disordered lives.

Third, contra the egalitarian interpretation of Jacksonian America, the country itself reflected destructive symptoms of deep dissonance. The wholesale geographical movement of entire ethnic populations, such as the Indians tribes to west of the Mississippi River and the African-American slaves into the Deep South, destabilized large parts of the country and gave birth to the festering sores of cultural and political conflict. All the while, a cultural renaissance occurred during the 1840s and 1850s but mostly in the northeastern part of the country. A new mainstream Americanism, in contrast to the "courtly muse" of the old aristocratic European world, appeared among writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville. But the mainstream failed to incorporate the beliefs of those who were on the fringes of society—blacks, women, Indians, and immigrant minorities. The diversification of religion in Jacksonian America helped ease the burdens of the disenfranchised by accommodating society's outcasts with a vibrant hope in both spiritual and material rewards in some apocalyptic millennium. These major issues tempered the religious development and outlook of the churches and other organizations concerned with metaphysical realities during the period of Jacksonian America.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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These observations no doubt present a negative outlook on the unsettling, rapid social changes of the time. Steven Mintz<sup>3</sup> notes that “the disintegration of an older patriarchal, hierarchical social order contributed to a deep sense of anxiety.”<sup>4</sup> This in turn prompted pessimistic and powerful societal fears that gave rise to America’s first age of reform, an age of remarkable spiritual, social, and cultural ferment. According to this construct, Jacksonian reform, in its religious expression, functioned as a favorable counter force to the destructive dissolution already occurring in American society. The religious movers and shakers of reform, primarily Christian evangelicals, moved their ideology away from the staunch Calvinism that was inherited from New England puritans in favor of popular revivalism. This resulted in the glowing vision of an apocalyptic millennium, even among secularists as well as religionists, and a very promising and comforting optimism to replace the desperate pessimism that gripped the country with fear.

Thus, in a certain sense, Jacksonian religion served—as conceptualized by Karl Marx but hardly intended by Mintz or other historians of nineteenth-century America—as an opiate for the masses. This is why Mintz’s overall approach fails to comprehend the totality of the complicated dynamics of religious expression during the Jacksonian period, and perhaps this is also why Mintz places Jacksonian reform in an overall framework of twentieth-century liberal

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<sup>3</sup>*Moralists and Modernizers: America’s Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, xiv.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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progressivism, but unconvincingly according to Leo Hirrel.<sup>5</sup> So why did such reactionary reform, if a positive response (“The Promise of the Millennium”) to the negatives of American society (“The Specter of Social Breakdown”), fail to avert the greater schism and devastation of the Civil War? A different or refined model for religion in Jacksonian America must be found to understand better the breakdown of its force and power by the mid-1850s.

Daniel Feller<sup>6</sup> challenges the negative reconstruction of Jacksonian America by modern historians as presentist and the intrusion of “our own doubts and despairs upon a people who could not even imagine, much less share, them.”<sup>7</sup> While his book is not a treatise on religion per se, Feller does say important things about the goodness and the eager anticipation of the spirit of America’s jubilee during the Age of Jackson. He contends that Americans mostly believed their nation to be blessed providentially for a unique purpose, even though they debated the nature of that purpose and the means whereby it might be achieved. Whereas modern historiography about the Jacksonian era focuses on the period as “the seedbed of modern America, but in a new way—as the point at which things went decisively wrong,” Feller wishes to give attention to the expectations and purpose of the people themselves. He notes, “I have tried to tell the story in terms that the people who lived it would have understood.” Instead of “tendentious history,” that

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<sup>5</sup>*Children of Wrath: New School Calvinism and Antebellum Reform* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 6.

<sup>6</sup>*The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815-1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, xiii.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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confuses chronology in its production of causalities built carelessly on a presumption of stasis, Feller illuminates the Jacksonian optimistic belief in the power of human effort to unleash “concrete, novel, exciting (and sometimes perturbing)” results. Rather than a time of foreboding—of conspiracy and corruption, of insecurity and uncertainty—Feller sees a time of exuberant optimism, an epoch of unsurpassed opportunity.<sup>8</sup> The implications for religion in Jacksonian America are quite instructive.

In 1826, the young nation celebrated the beginning of its fiftieth year of independence. In the same year on the Fourth of July, “the Day of Jubilee,” an auspicious but providential omen occurred: the death of two grand apostles of independence’s Declaration—John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. The commemoration began two years earlier with the visit of Marquis de Lafayette, the famous French general of the Revolution, to the United States in the summer of 1824. During this festival of Jubilee, friends and foreigners, politicians and preachers spoke of American ingenuity and skill. With excitement and expectation, they privately and publicly praised the achievements and the prospects of America in conversations, letters, and literature. While to European visitors this seemed like so much wind or a contrived, pompous mask for the problem of insecurity, to most Americans the exuberance was only natural.

In an important sense, America stood on the threshold of a new and better world. With hierarchy and aristocracy overthrown by the Revolution, Americans came to believe in the pragmatic workings of enlightened self-interest. The progress of liberty, with its closely related

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., xiii-xiv.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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tenets of equality and opportunity, could guarantee not only individual attainment and social advancement but also the metamorphosis of human character. As Jubilee ushered in the second half of America's first century and a new era of possibilities, Americans saw themselves confronted with important, even imminent and urgent, decisions. As the nation expanded its global involvement, the results of the American achievement stood in stark relief to the fledgling efforts in the cause of liberty elsewhere. Americans generally enjoyed both material and moral wealth unsurpassed in time or location—a good government, a virtuous citizenry, and abundant resources. But the question loomed: What should Americans do with her blessings? According to Feller, a prophetic consciousness rested the fate of the nation and even the world with the choices of Americans at the critical time of Jubilee. This ideology of aggrandizement translated into the religious setting of Jacksonian America in a decisive way.

As Feller shows, the “New Light” brand of Congregationalism and Presbyterianism departed from strict Calvinistic orthodoxy and charted a new course that steered clear of Unitarianism while it also avoided Universalism. Evangelical powerhouses like Lyman Beecher and Charles Finney held to a high and noble teleological purpose for the American nation, but in antithesis to anti-Christian utopian reformers such as Robert Owen, they advocated dramatically different means for the new world to attain its special destiny. Their replacement of traditional Calvinistic dogmas of divine omnipotence and human inability with emotional suasion, human initiative, and strict pragmatism—which they copied from Baptist and Methodist revivalists—infused mainstream Christianity with new life and the drive toward active reform. This shift in emphasis divided Presbyterianism, but it kept “the country’s deepest religious

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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tradition vibrant in an optimistic and democratic age. . . . More than that, by linking the evangelical impulse . . . to a program of holistic moral improvement, and firing both with millennial energy, [Beecher and his fellows] retooled American Protestantism from an instrument of individual salvation to a scheme of national regeneration.”<sup>9</sup>

While mainstream reformers, with the help of prosperous merchants like Arthur and Lewis Tappan from New York City, spiritedly sought to Christianize America, the optimistic vision of a glorious millennium coming down to earth from heaven through human involvement spawned the rise of new sects—Millerites, Campbellites, and Mormons—and even a new political party—the Antimasons. The spirit of Jubilee sparked remarkable diversity in the religious setting, as the ideas of liberty and equality caught on and motivated believers to cast aside the boundaries and restraints of denominational control. Feller describes the highly charged emotional environment as rebellious, unpredictable, and even anarchic: “Relentless proselytizing created a spiritual milieu that was exhilarating and highly fluid. Most Americans encountered revivalism not as a methodical competition of creeds and systems, but as a kaleidoscope of new ideas and experiments, each one promising the fulfillment of prophecy, the purification of earthly existence, and the end of the world. Driven by novelty and excitement, and without much regard to consistency, converts leaped readily from one enthusiasm to the next.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 99-100.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 103.

As paradigms of this religious fervor, Feller notes the odyssey of spiritual drifters like William Cooper Howells and Sidney Rigdon, and he relates the spiritual splintering of urban Philadelphia, “the coterie of textile manufacturers,” among Baptists, Episcopalians, freethinkers, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Quakers. He reveals that even the most rational minded, like Alexander Campbell and Robert Owen, used very similar premises to argue quite different conclusions. Both viewed human happiness as the highest goal of existence and judged social and religious systems by their probability of achieving that happiness. Both assumed the reality of a coming millennium, and both totally disregarded any argument that did not rest on rational bases. But in his debate with Owen, Campbell drew the favor of the masses, since he championed the Christian religion as the legitimate means of social progress. Americans would decide for a Christian destiny, but it would be a diverse and fragmented Christianity. In this way, American Christianity could accommodate what Feller calls the “fruits of commitment” or the “code of morals” by which Americans could “prepare the way for God’s kingdom by purifying themselves and the nation of sin.”<sup>11</sup>

Beecher’s “creed of usefulness” and the commonly accepted “credo of benevolence” promoted a wholehearted Christian war against sin and social abuse. As they tried to morally regenerate the entire nation, Christian reformers attacked alcohol, dueling, the profaning of the Sabbath, prostitution, various forms of popular entertainment, and the practice of slavery. But the reform ethos, according to Feller, proved to be a double-edged sword. Most reformers

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 106.



David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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worked from altruistic motives and sacrificed much. But many Americans rejected their self-defined humility and regarded the religious reformers as so much “prudes and busybodies, meddling in other people’s lives and telling them what to do.”<sup>12</sup> Unbelievers for the most part remained unconvinced of the “moral certitude of Christian zealots,” and the compulsions of voluntarism, especially when coercive, proved particularly damaging. Even fellow-believers, like Baptists, Methodists, and Catholics, remained coldly distant, as they shunned crusaders whom they felt to be judgmental and oppressive. The net effect, by Feller’s evaluation, meant the division of evangelical reform into two distinct camps: those who held to a sweeping approach to reform (to include economic and political in addition to spiritual means), and those who saw their mission as personal rather than national (they wanted to save souls not the entire country). This polarization tainted the spirit of Jubilee at its very heart and soul, and it drove a permanent wedge between the politically inclined reform movement and the more traditional Christian moralism of the Baptists, Disciples, Methodists, and Catholics who “had no history of power and no inclination to exercise authority beyond their own ranks.”<sup>13</sup> For the latter, the vigor of evangelical reform and its involvement in the political and economic affairs of the nation seemed to threaten the moral autonomy of Christianity and the democratic self-determinism of both individual believers and their churches.

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 117.

Leo P. Hirrel<sup>14</sup> generally concurs with the correctness of this optimistic perspective on antebellum religion and reform. In contrast to historians like Clifford S. Griffin, Charles Cole, Charles I. Foster, Joseph Gusfield, and David Donald who favor a social control theory whereby the displaced elite classes used the issues of religious reform to regain their status in society,<sup>15</sup> Hirrel surveys the work done by various writers that emphasizes the optimism that erupted in antebellum society as a result of the supposed demise of Calvinist orthodoxy. He notes especially the work of Gilbert H. Barnes, Alice F. Tyler, Timothy L. Smith, Ronald G. Walters, John L. Thomas, and Robert H. Abzug. These scholars questioned the use of social control theory as an appropriate explanation. They instead believed the religiously motivated reformers were the forerunners of the Social Gospel: they exuded vibrant optimism in the possibility of human effort to usher in the millennial kingdom of Christ, they repudiated staunch Calvinistic dogmas and favored a mediating theology to preserve both theocentric governance and human free will, and they adopted a form of romanticism in expectation that the Christian gospel would spread to the entire nation and the whole world.

But from the perspective of the intricate world of New School Calvinists, Hirrel indicates a few weaknesses of the approach that sees antebellum reform as totally optimistic. First, it fails to give credence to the fact that the New School feared human depravity and saw such as inherent in man's condition, a necessary and potent impulse for their reform efforts. Second, the

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<sup>14</sup>Hirrel, *Children of Wrath*.

<sup>15</sup>See the brief review essay by Ralph E. Luker, "Religion and Social Control in the Nineteenth-Century American City," *Journal of Urban History* 2 (May 1976): 363-368.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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optimistic construct only holds true if the assumption of traditional Calvinism as pessimistic is valid and that New School ministers and theologians plainly repudiated it. Hirrel rightly protests these simplistic reconstructions of the complex and often perplexing New School Calvinists.

In the first part of his book, Hirrel hardly shows the interaction of the world of New School Calvinism with American society at large, even though he gives glimpses of the influence of important ideologies from the deists, the common sense philosophers, and the evangelical revivalists. He nicely illuminates the inner circles of New School leadership and their peculiar theological disputes—both dogma and counter dogma—and this highlights an important aspect of most religious communions: they generally talk to themselves, among themselves, and usually in language that only they can understand. Even with modification by New School thinkers, the theological walls of reformed Calvinism mightily fortified the bulwarks of Congregationalism and Presbyterianism. This illustrates another important truth about most religious communions particularly in their denominational capacity: they generally resist change and reflect a consistent conservatism in matters of faith and practice.

Hirrel, though, does give attention to the role of New School religion as it played itself out in the various meanings of the republic. He notes the overwhelming affiliation of New School clergy with the Whig party, their distrust of professional politicians, their own use of professional standing to influence certain political issues, and the process of disestablishment of Congregationalism especially in Massachusetts and Connecticut. He shows how New School thinkers fit in with the prevailing postmillennial type of “America’s religious messianism” or what he calls, after Nathan Hatch, “republican millennialism.” In this latter respect, Hirrel’s New

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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School intellectuals, as well as other Christian reformers, parrot the old Puritan jeremiads, namely, that America's good fortune carried with it a corresponding obligation to fulfill its divine mission and that God would withdraw his favor and protection if the opponents of Christianity frustrated America's eschatological role. But opposite Hirrel's thesis about diversity, this emphasis identifies the New School Calvinists with the bulk of antebellum reformers.

In the second part of *Children of Wrath*, Hirrel similarly explains the role of his New School Calvinists in various benevolent societies and the national movements against slavery, alcohol, and Catholicism. While Hirrel's descriptive approach necessarily exposes differences between Calvinist and Arminian believers, his New School reformers strikingly and unabashedly resemble the non-Calvinist brand in both the locus and goal of overall reform. As a result, a common enemy and a common goal render irrelevant the distinctive theological or philosophical underpinnings of the New School reformers and provide, in the process of leveling or democratization, a salient example of American pragmatism at work.

A good case in point is Hirrel's treatment of New School attitudes toward the Catholic Church. This analysis provides little that is different from other Protestant attitudes toward Catholicism (except, as Hirrel notes, that Charles Hodge of Princeton University admitted that the Catholic Church was part of the invisible Church of Christ).<sup>16</sup> Hirrel admirably defines the important anti-Catholic background of colonial New England, the identification of the Papacy and the Roman Church as anti-Christ, and the role of nativism in anti-Catholic prejudice. But

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 96-98.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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Hirrel's New School Calvinists, in their fear of Catholic subversion of both the Christian religion and the American nation, reflect nothing unique and parallel broader Protestant sentiments. Even the popularization of the bizarre Maria Monk episode, inspired and led by notable New School adherents Rev. W. K. Hoyt, Rev. J. J. Slocum, Theodore Dwight, and Rev. George Bourne, indicates widespread misgivings about Catholicism among Protestant Americans rather than any peculiar New School perspective. Therefore, while Hirrel's descriptions about New School Calvinists show their distinctive theology, it does not provide a justifiable riposte to the generally optimistic tendencies of Protestant reform in antebellum America.

By way of contrast, an excellent but older study of nativism by Ray Allen Billington<sup>17</sup> indicates a more extensive movement against Catholicism than Hirrel seems to suggest. Prior to the nineteenth-century, the strongest No-Popery sentiments developed in Maryland and Massachusetts. By the time of the Revolution, the influence of French liberalism on American independence could not quell the hatred of Catholics that was deeply rooted in the American psyche. The unsettling force of foreign immigration in the Jacksonian period, particularly of Germans and Irish, stirred No-Popery advocates to religious extremism and political activism. As a result of the phenomenal growth of Catholicism in America from about 1810 to 1830 and also the Papal Jubilee of Leo XII in 1827, Protestants felt threatened and became very defensive. Secret oaths, the Inquisition, and the rites of Masonry became linked in the minds of most American Protestants to Roman Catholicism, so much so that many Protestant educational

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<sup>17</sup>*The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (1938; repr., Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1963).

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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societies, sparked by Finney's revivalistic New Measures, targeted Romanism as a dangerous enemy. Religious and even secular newspapers joined the cause against Catholicism and stirred the populace toward violence. In August 1834, a convent of the Ursuline sisters in Charlestown (Massachusetts) was destroyed by rioters, and bizarre stories about monastic life,<sup>18</sup> circulated widely by the press, seemed to justify the conflagration.

As westward expansion continued in earnest, Americans now perceived a vital threat to Manifest Destiny—a plot among foreigners, the Roman Catholic Church, and the despotic monarchs of Europe to gain control of the Mississippi River valley. Most Protestant churches—the Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Dutch Reformed—responded and joined the battle to save the American West from the Pope. A concerted effort among Protestants, notably in their organization of local societies and their outreach by educational means, began to wage war against Roman Catholicism's ignorance, priestcraft, and superstition, and hatred of Roman Catholics moved beyond the religious into the political sphere by the 1840s.

A feeling of alien invasion by lawless and rowdy foreigners—immigrants who were mostly Roman Catholic—imperiled the new world's carefully crafted order of economics and politics. With the social structure so threatened, Protestants responded politically to reduce immigration and to slow the process of naturalization through the national agenda of the American Republican or Native American Party. But impatience with the political process prompted

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<sup>18</sup>Two examples are Rebecca Reed's *Six Months in a Convent* (1835) and Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (1836). *Ibid.*, 90-108.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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certain anti-Catholic antagonists to stir up violent riots during the summer of 1844, first in Philadelphia and then in New York City. This violent zeal against popery eventually waned as action became once again politicized in resistance to foreign immigration and the brief rise of the Know-Nothing Party during the decade before the Civil War. Overall, Billington's *The Protestant Crusade* presents a compelling analysis of a major division in Jacksonian America along religious lines—Protestant versus Catholic. During the first half of the nineteenth-century, Protestantism with little exception wholeheartedly resisted Catholicism and remained unified in its opposition to what it perceived as a threat to the optimism of the American endeavor.

Mark Y. Hanley,<sup>19</sup> however, denies any monolithic view of Protestantism with respect to the destiny of the nation. His basic argument is twofold: first, the “muscular” liberal culture that evolved in Jacksonian America unsettled the mainstream Protestant conviction in the providential nature of republican liberty; and second, the evidence of this Protestant quarrel with growing American liberalism and materialism comes mainly from “spiritual discourse” or homilies and sermons that “elevated transcendent religious concerns above civic and narrow denominational agendas.”<sup>20</sup> Hanley hits on a significant aspect of inner, spiritual faith among the churches and their clergy, but he fails to apprehend what properly might be called, according to most religious discourse, the pernicious side of societies suffering apocalyptic phenomena.

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<sup>19</sup>*Beyond a Christian Commonwealth: The Protestant Quarrel with the American Republic, 1830-1860* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.

In other words, the negative aspects of Jacksonian America, as understood and decried by pessimistic homilists, constituted an integral part of the nation's apocalyptic struggle. The demonic contributed just as fully to millennial expectations and realities as did the angelic. In biblical literature the discourse of apocalyptic upheaval also included the demonic—anti-Christ, Gog and Magog, Armageddon—and this is what Hanley claims to uncover: spiritual discourse. The fact that Protestant preachers in Jacksonian America railed against the nation's "material pretensions" and offered their congregants an alternative, traditional path that both criticized the prevailing culture and legitimized further change does not necessarily negate their optimistic eschatological viewpoint overall.<sup>21</sup> So while Hanley is right to emphasize the pessimistic strain in Protestant religious discourse, he is wrong to remove that discourse from its larger context of a dualistic, apocalyptic struggle toward some imminent or future millennial fulfillment.

But Hanley rightly extends the religious debate of Protestants against the republic—that derived from the Puritan jeremiads—well into the nineteenth-century, and this recognition of democratic "cultural tyranny" over traditional faith simply highlights an older, unsettled church-state struggle.<sup>22</sup> Many of the objectors, steeped in Calvinistic thought that leaned heavily on Augustine's *City of God* and its theocratic state, fought to preserve the noble spiritual destiny of the nation, something they felt secular cultural crosscurrents were eroding swiftly, and did so by their energetic promotion of social benevolence and reform movements devoted to evangelical

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 27.



David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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aims.<sup>23</sup> Hanley in this respect does add an important element to the debate about whether the overall tone of religion in Jacksonian America is optimistic or pessimistic, and he highlights the oft-missed ambiguity of apocalyptic thought—its optimism from the divine or revelatory perspective (i.e., the biblical viewpoint) and its pessimism from the human or derived perspective (i.e., current or historical events). But as noted above, Hanley neglects the larger context in *Beyond a Christian Commonwealth* when he views Protestant spiritual discourse as strictly critique rather than expectant and anticipatory.

Much better is Nathan O. Hatch's comprehensive study<sup>24</sup> in which he argues how thoroughgoing democratic beliefs and processes in the early republic shaped the development of antebellum Protestantism and left indelible and lasting marks on the structures of American Christianity. While he narrows his examination of this paradigm to five distinct Protestant traditions (the Baptists, the Disciples, the Methodists, the black churches, and the Mormons), he sets the evolution of strict anti-clericalism against the backdrop of a staunch Calvinistic establishment of Congregationalists and Presbyterians. He describes the popular appeal of these mass religious movements and their energetic leaders who, as "self-conscious outsiders," took up the task of kingdom-building with "an ethic of unrelenting toil, a passion for expansion, a hostility to orthodox belief and style, a zeal for religious reconstruction, and a systematic plan to

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>24</sup>*The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989).

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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realize their ideas.”<sup>25</sup> By use of skillful methods of communication, that appealed to common people, and new means of typesetting, whereby the printed word became more accessible to the masses,<sup>26</sup> these advocates of religious populism ignited an egalitarian fire: the antithesis to aristocratic culture and bureaucratic ecclesiastical institutions and a democratic orientation that has marked American Christianity over the course of its history from other western industrial democracies. Hatch concludes that this religious populism reflects “the passions of ordinary people and the charisma of democratic movement-builders” and remains “among the oldest and deepest impulses in American life.”<sup>27</sup>

Hatch’s reconstruction is superbly compelling, especially in its focus on the antebellum passion for equality or what he calls “the incarnation of the church into popular culture.” He emphasizes in this light three important points. First, popular religious movements strictly denied the traditional distinction between clergy and laity and refused to defer to the wisdom of learned theologians and creedal orthodoxies. Second, popular religious movements empowered common and ordinary people by affirming the legitimacy of their “deepest spiritual impulses” instead of judging them by orthodox doctrine set forth by respectable clergymen. Third, promoters of popular religious movements failed to see their own limitations and thereby yielded

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>26</sup>For a superb analysis of the evangelical use of popular media, see R. Laurence Moore, “Religion, Secularization, and the Shaping of the Culture Industry in Antebellum America,” *American Quarterly* 41 (June 1989): 216-242.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 5.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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to extreme eschatological visions of the complete overthrow of “coercive and authoritarian structures” in an apocalyptic “new age of religious and social harmony.”<sup>28</sup> American Protestant Christianity as a result became a liberating force, as it gave antebellum Americans the right to think and act for themselves rather than depend on the mediation of an educated elite. This form of religious democratization further promoted zeal for a hopeful future, a millennial society in which individual equality might be realized. But as Hatch shows, this transformation spawned a great deal of anti-intellectualism and even a measure of what might be labeled “spiritual anarchy” among popular religious leaders and their followers, so naturally it was not without its vocal detractors.

Hatch clearly indicates the agitation experienced by ecclesiastical leaders of Calvinistic persuasion, even moderate or New Light Calvinists. They felt annoyed and threatened by “the ignorant teacher, the mere ‘Empiric’ who professed to communicate what he did not possess, offering hearers chaff instead of wheat.”<sup>29</sup> They were repulsed by the idea that the common people—the rabble—were doing theology by and for themselves. A battle consequently raged over who would hold the reins of religious power and authority, a battle not unlike disputes in the early republic about popular sovereignty in politics, law, and medicine. Fierce discord enjoined vivid images of apocalyptic fury as independents and backwoods dissenters “challenged the right of a natural elite to speak for the people and empowered those who could claim no real stake in

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 9-11.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 19.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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the promise of America.”<sup>30</sup> As preachers on the fringes began to reconstruct Protestant Christianity in a radical way, they achieved three important syntheses. First, they combined rationalism with supernaturalism in mystical experiences of biblical literalism. Second, they propounded a divisive evangelical ethos by the popularization of private interpretation of scripture which diversified and multiplied religious opinions even among preachers and adherents of the same denominational communion. Third, they championed “the primacy of individual conscience” and inverted “the traditional modes of religious authority,” so that “instead of revering tradition, learning, solemnity, and decorum . . . a diverse array of populist preachers exalted youth, free expression, and religious ecstasy. They explicitly taught that divine insight was reserved for the poor and humble rather than the proud and learned.”<sup>31</sup>

This egalitarian drive found comfortable expression in both eschatological and millennial aspects of ambiguous biblical apocalyptic discourse. It also decapitated the Calvinist fountainhead. But, as Hatch observes, the established churches found themselves powerless to stem the tide. “What is striking about the period after the Revolution in America is not disestablishment per se but the impotence of Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian churches in the face of dissent. At the turn of the century, their own houses lay in such disarray that movements such as the Methodists, Baptists, and Christians were given free rein to

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 35.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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experiment.”<sup>32</sup> They invariably struggled against this “sea of sectarian rivalries.” In this context, however, Hatch poses his own critique of the more positive assessment of antebellum religion as a “powerfully integrating and cohesive force.”

The “positive historical assessment has much to commend it,” he writes. “But it fails to do justice to a darker, foreboding side of American civilization and its religious underpinnings” that gave cause for concern to men like Lyman Beecher and Horace Bushnell who often spoke confidently of the triumph of Christian civilization in America. Hatch notes that Bushnell’s vision of millennial hope, quoted from a speech addressed to the American Home Missionary Society in 1847 and used commonly by historians to illustrate the optimism of the time, concluded his jeremiad-like exposition entitled “Barbarism the First Danger,” a gloomy judgment of the chaotic conditions in the expanding republic. But herein, in Bushnell’s own ambiguity about the state of Christian civilization in America, lies the answer to Hatch’s own dilemma about whether or not historians have been “overly sanguine about the religious cohesiveness of the young nation, what Perry Miller termed ‘the centripetal power of the Revival.’”<sup>33</sup> What Hatch and most other historians fail to realize is the inherent ambiguity of apocalyptic discourse and its nature to include both optimistic and pessimistic language. Bushnell’s speech contained both positive and negative ideas, because he used apocalyptic imagery as a framework for his understanding of the state of affairs in America in the middle of the nineteenth-century. So to

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 62-63.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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categorize Bushnell or any other religious figure entirely one way or the other is to miss the point.

This principle of ambiguity in respect to apocalyptic language becomes important when trying to understand the dynamics of an interactive and highly charged religious environment such as existed in Jacksonian America. Christian disputants use the same negative apocalyptic images, chiefly biblical in origin, to label and discredit their opponent's ideas and practices as demonic or satanically derived. Conversely, personal beliefs and hopeful expectations find expression in positive apocalyptic images that recognize their divine source and their part in the millennial kingdom. But in apocalyptic discourse, the two strains—optimistic and pessimistic—feed off each other, neither can exist without the other, and ultimately the victor witnesses an eschatological blessing.

The religious talk of antebellum America, on the one hand, embraced an optimistic belief in the millennial kingdom. This belief was prized, especially in light of newly won egalitarian liberties, but defined distinctly by Calvinists and Arminians, clerics and revivalists, papists and Protestants. On the other hand, antebellum Christian discourse painfully realized the bitter and cataclysmic struggle necessary to overcome the spiritual forces of the kingdoms of this world that opposed the Lord's millennial reign. But what seems to be true for most apocalyptic struggles is that conflict and upheaval only intensify the apocalyptic drive toward some imminent resolution. Hatch recognizes this intense battle within Protestant circles, as he skillfully documents the internal debate over church and spiritual leadership, its sources of legitimacy in the young republic, and the concomitant ascendancy of the populace in the nation's religious determination.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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In his historiographical afterword, he appropriately calls for continued study of religion in Jacksonian America, especially from a less elitist perspective, in order to get at the dynamics of the interaction of social class, political influence, religious leadership, and cultural authority.<sup>34</sup>

While more ecclesiastical in its emphasis, an older work by Timothy L. Smith<sup>35</sup> concurs with Hatch's democratization of Christianity in antebellum America, or as Smith calls it—the democratization of Calvinism. He traces the changes in favor of “lay leadership, the drive toward interdenominational fellowship, [and] the primacy of ethics over dogma.”<sup>36</sup> He also notes the growth in perfectionist ideologies, particularly among Holiness and Methodist groups (although not absent from most Protestant faiths), and how this stirred these evangelicals to attack social problems like greed, poverty, and slavery—a foreshadow of the social gospel, he believes, in the late nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> Smith's work is most helpful in its assessment of urban revivalism and its reform influence as well as his candid admission of the primacy of European influence on the Protestant churches in America over anything that was happening on the American frontier. He writes, “During the nineteenth century the vital center of American Protestantism was in the cities rather than the rural West. . . . Further investigation may demonstrate that the currents of religious fervor which swept back and forth across the Atlantic

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 200-226.

<sup>35</sup>*Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1957).

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>37</sup>See especially his “The Evangelical Origins of Social Christianity.” Ibid., 148-162.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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were more important than anything which happened on the frontier. It is significant that every prominent American evangelist . . . gained his reputation in part from reports of his success in overseas cities. Great churchmen of the 1850s . . . thought their revival faith not a wilderness byway, but an avenue of ecumenicity down which the gospel army would roll to conquer the world.”<sup>38</sup> But while highlighting a needful perspective, Smith draws a lot of his information from what might be called “official” sources, so he neglects what later social historians would regard as most important to the reconstruction of antebellum Protestantism. He also looks exclusively at the two decades prior to the Civil War—the 1840s and 1850s—and so reflects the period that Hatch sees as consolidative of an earlier fragmentation.<sup>39</sup>

But Smith argues persuasively for the resurgence of revivalism from 1840 through 1857. He shows how tenets of sanctification and holiness among all the faiths eroded the old prejudices against revivalism that had become more controllable and therefore more palatable.<sup>40</sup> Renewed visions of perfectionism, tempered by a vital millennial zeal, quickened old benevolent societies, reawakened interest in interdenominational social work, and increased the spirit of unity among the various churches in “their crusade to sanctify the national culture and convert the world to

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>39</sup>“Upward Aspiration and Democratic Dissent” in Hatch, *Democratization of American Christianity*, 193-209.

<sup>40</sup>Compare Smith’s “Righteousness and Hope: Christian Holiness and the Millennial Vision in America, 1800-1900,” *American Quarterly* 31 (Spring 1979): 21-45.



David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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Christian principles.”<sup>41</sup> Smith offers limited sociological interpretations of this revived religious drive, such as the role played by mass hysteria in the awakening of 1858 due to the “long strain of the slavery crisis and the shock of the panic of 1837.”<sup>42</sup> But Smith in general seems satisfied just to narrate the facts, as he correctly notes the tendency of secular historians to give attention to aberrant groups like Millerites, Mormons, and Shakers more so than Baptists and Methodists in their treatises about antebellum revivalism and reform.<sup>43</sup> By his omission of the pesky dissenters (something that Hatch does not do), Smith can remain confidently optimistic about the role of Protestant revivalism in antebellum America.

For example, he asserts that “revivalistic religion and the quest of Christian perfection lay at the fountainhead of our nation’s heritage of hope.” He explains that not only did the manifest destiny of a Christian America replace the antiquated Calvinist notion of foreordination, but the democratic promise of evangelical faith, evidenced in powerful great awakenings, forged Christian liberty, equality, and fraternity as the passions of the land.<sup>44</sup> This linking of revivalism and perfectionism to millennial expectations created a social volatility. A new sense of social responsibility inspired “the identification of America’s destiny with the Christian’s hope.” The shift in philosophy toward Arminianism brought about “a new reliance upon human measures to

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<sup>41</sup>Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 44.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 79.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 7.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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hasten the dawning day.” Consequently, even nonconformist faiths like the holiness groups “held optimistic views of a temporal millennium and of the necessity of social action to achieve it.”<sup>45</sup> But Smith mainly sees the religious influence, and he can only lament but not really explain “the tragedy of civil war” that “shook the faith of American evangelicals in the triumph of this kingdom over personal and social evil.”<sup>46</sup> While Smith correctly attributes a novel but effective system of church-state relations or “the voluntary system” to American Protestants,<sup>47</sup> he does not give any concrete help toward understanding the richly diverse and highly combative elements of antebellum Protestantism that aggravated the nation at the dawning of its greatest conflict in the 1860s.

A recent contribution, though, to the key role of religion in the development of the South’s sectionalism comes from Mitchell Snay,<sup>48</sup> whose study relies heavily on the published writings of “Gentleman Theologians”—the elite of the southern clergy. This patrician resource, broadened by Snay’s examination of religious discourse from denominational newspapers and the official records of the governing bodies of Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches, reveals a plausible connection between the religious rhetoric about slavery, secession,

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 229, 232.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 230.

<sup>47</sup>According to Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations in the 1830s, this power of religion to regulate the mores of the community was “the foremost of the political institutions of the country . . . [and] indispensable to the maintenance of republican government.” Ibid., 35.

<sup>48</sup>*Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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and southern national identity and its political counterpart that defined the important issues that led to Civil War. But Snay is very cautious about any causal links. For example, in reference to the denominational schisms of the 1840s, he admits that “a direct line of influence from the religious schisms to Southern politics is difficult to demonstrate. The language of religious schisms and the political discourse of the 1840s does . . . strongly suggest that religious and political leaders shared a common framework for understanding the sectional conflict over slavery.”<sup>49</sup> This, however, does not negate the weighty impact of Protestant religion in the antebellum South, something Snay demonstrates considerably.<sup>50</sup>

Since the problem of slavery defined southern sectionalism that, like the issue of national identity, evolved chiefly in the arena of national politics, Snay suggests three reasons to look to religion for the origins and nature of the South’s separation from the North: the central place of religion in the South’s culture and society, the overtly religious nature of the sectional controversy over slavery, and the close ties between religion and nationalism in early America.<sup>51</sup> Snay views the growth of a distinctive southernness, along with the practice of slavery, as part of the wider search for national identity that spanned the antebellum period. For southern Protestant clergy, this search for national identity fell under the purview of moral and religious tenets. Southern clergy respected the separation of church and state, something morally sanctioned by

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 143.

<sup>50</sup>For a much different approach that centers on the South’s popular culture, see Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 2-5.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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the emphasis of evangelicalism on individual rather than corporate salvation and legally approved in the post-Revolution era by the disestablishment of state churches and the disenfranchisement of clergymen from political office. After the crisis of 1835, they felt northern abolitionists breached a fine line of distinction between the existence of slavery as a civil or political question, something not to be broached by ministers, and the institution of slavery and its attendant relationships as a concern of moral and religious principles, something open to the attention of clergy. Southerners condemned the religious attack on the existence of slavery—a civil matter—as a false intrusion of the church into matters of the state, so they themselves felt compelled to enter the political arena in order to defend not only the morality of slavery but also the integrity of biblical religion.<sup>52</sup>

This basic rupture between northern and southern clerics over the problem of slavery precipitated the ecclesiastical schisms of the various denominations in the 1840s and helped define, at least from the southern perspective, the breaking away as a necessary act of purification. Some felt that in its larger dimension the breaking of the churches' moral bond, which they assumed to be a cohesive force for the nation politically, would lead to the severing of the political union of the nation. Others felt, in a more positive vein, that the ecclesiastical schisms would weaken sectional strife and thereby help to preserve the Union. Regardless, these "harbingers of disunion" must be seen as no less an important carryover from the religious logic

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<sup>52</sup>See Snay's chapters on "Slavery defended: The morality of slavery and the infidelity of abolitionism" (53-77) and "Slavery sanctified: The slaveholding ethic and the religious mission to the slaves" (78-109).

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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of secession to the political rhetoric of secession, especially as “a restorative act aimed at purging subversive elements and preserving original principles and institutions.”<sup>53</sup> Snay remarks, “This paradigm of separation provided the framework in which Southern clergymen thought about political separation from the North. It was this kind of mind set that encouraged Southerners to see their enemies as the true seceders, who had departed from established principles. This interpretation of religious schism anticipated the core of the secessionist argument that disunion was a conservative movement aimed at preserving the constitutional integrity of the original Union.”<sup>54</sup>

By the beginning of the cataclysmic 1860s, ideas of providential guidance, redemptive adversity, and civil millennialism fortuitously convinced southern clergy of the South’s role as Redeemer Nation and the New Israel, motifs appropriate not to the apostate American Union but to the revolutionary Confederacy. The religious strains of nationalism depicted the South as a redemptive enterprise for the benefit of all mankind, and abundant parallels were made between the plight of southerners and the experiences of biblical Israel. These motifs not only provided legitimacy to the cause of the Confederacy but also reinforced the South’s role as a nation both beleaguered and oppressed. As Snay suggests:

In a fundamental sense, the antebellum sectional controversy was a war of words. Each side essentially sought political legitimacy through the appropriation of language. The debate over slavery involved a competition over the rights of interpreting the

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<sup>53</sup>See Snay’s chapter on “The religious logic of secession” (151-180). His treatment of the “fast day” and its special religious rhetoric is particularly insightful.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

Constitution, the meaning of republicanism, the Bible, and civil religion. This contest over language was made possible and even encouraged by the ambivalent and incomplete nature of American nationalism in the decades between the Revolution and the Civil War. The Union was based on a loose consensus on principles embodied in the constitutional settlement of 1787. The sectional controversy over slavery forced Americans to define those principles with greater precision, which led to conflict and eventually disunion. Religion clearly reflected and undoubtedly contributed to this ambiguity. Like the concept of Union, the Bible and civil religion held contradictory tendencies that could nourish contrasting separate sectional ideologies while simultaneously uniting Northerners and Southerners under a common umbrella of beliefs.<sup>55</sup>

Although Snay's *Gospel of Disunion* limits the discussion of antebellum religion to his "Gentlemen Theologians," it shows the impact of religious rhetoric about southern secession and nationalism, a language much more widespread than Snay perhaps credits, on the advent of the Civil War.

In contrast to Snay's look at the effects of evangelical religion in the South, Robert H. Abzug<sup>56</sup> concentrates on the efforts of religious reformers in the North, notably "the work of a significant minority of New Englanders and others who grew up in the forty years prior to the Civil War."<sup>57</sup> Rather than a comprehensive approach, Abzug intentionally charts a steady path toward the cosmology of reformers. His purpose is twofold: first, to find out how reformers reshaped the details of everyday life; and second, to shed light on the relationship between the "sacred" and "profane" elements of reform. Abzug purposely disclaims interest in

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 198.

<sup>56</sup>*Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 29.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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ecclesiological, sociological, political, psychological, or theological aspects of reform and thus avoids what he feels to be the modern trend in reform studies toward reductionism. As he attempts to unveil the religious imaginations of reformers like Benjamin Rush, Lyman Beecher, William Lloyd Garrison, and Lydia Maria Child, who address troubling issues of antebellum society from their genuine experiences of cosmological yearnings, Abzug shows how these “true believers” transcended the quotidian, the sectarian, and the simplistic to find sacred connections or “sacralize” the American cosmos.<sup>58</sup>

On occasion, Abzug himself seems to apply a bit of socio-religious reductionism when he identifies these reformers as a peculiar social type—religious virtuosos—according to Max Weber’s description. But while Weber intended by this label the ascetics or the otherworldly-minded in a society like monks, holy men, and mystics, Abzug remarks that “in Protestant societies, however, which focused on the earthly and frowned upon formal holy orders, such types, as one scholar puts it, ‘find their honor and their struggle everywhere on God’s earth.’”<sup>59</sup> Nonetheless, because of the far-reaching significance of the transcendent meanings these reformers brought into politics and society, Abzug submits that they “have exerted an influence on politics and society

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<sup>58</sup>For a similar work, although one that seeks to build a sociology of religious movements based on their theory of reality or ontology, see George M. Thomas, *Revivalism and Cultural Change: Christianity, Nation Building, and the Market in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

far greater than one might expect from any quantifiable measure of their popularity or resources.”<sup>60</sup>

As Abzug weaves his story around clear-cut themes of antebellum culture or “a kind of genealogy of reform cosmology,” he correctly represents the ambiguity or ambivalence of these virtuosos. In their penchant to apply the passions of the religious imagination, with both holistic and millennial significations, to issues like diet, manual labor, or temperance, they reoriented the discussion from a worldly to a higher spiritual plane. This further polarized the religious debate among ecclesiastics, as reformers asserted their vision of God’s plan to replace the “natural” state that existed in regard to the economy, gender, race, physiology, and politics. These reformers operated somewhere between the church and the world—in the world but not of it—as “their *mentalite* grew not only from their intimate knowledge of an everyday material world but also as a function of their estrangement from it.”<sup>61</sup> Their efforts took a distinct American shape—something that came out of the Constitution’s separation of church and state, the post-Revolutionary debate about the role of America itself, and the rapid changes in the nation’s economy and society created by increasing industrialization. In the area of radical reform, Abzug includes the quirkiness of Sylvester Graham’s vegetarianism, William Alcott’s physiology, and Orson Fowler’s phrenological science, a mark of America’s individualism even in its cosmological yearnings, and of special value is the attention he gives to women’s reform

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., ix.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 4.



David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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movements.<sup>62</sup> His *Cosmos Crumbling*, which deserves a wide reading and a subsequent study on the importance of religious cosmology for the entire nation, propounds the theme of religious cosmology as unabashedly necessary to the function of American antebellum reform.

Religion in Jacksonian America seemed to fulfill the ambiguous yearnings of a restless yet relentless people who were struggling to find their identity while asserting their independence. The effect on American Christianity, especially American Protestantism, produced a religious pluralism that, to this day, has remained unmatched. In the heat of the nation's accelerated growth and progress, Christianity's flame expanded through evangelistic revival and progressed by its adoption of social in addition to spiritual endeavors. And like the nation's infrastructure and its political and social institutions, the sects of Christianity collided, fragmented, and then reformed in new and enterprising ways. The picture unfortunately was often unclear. But periods of unprecedented growth, division followed by convergence, then entrenchment that led to a fateful separation, tell the general story of religion in antebellum America. The story heralded an America as hopeful, watchful, and providentially situated to change the world. In spite of their shortcomings, Jacksonian Americans produced an America that did just that but at a later time. Religion—American Protestant Christianity—kept alive the

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<sup>62</sup>See his "The Body Reforms" (163-182), "The Woman Question" (183-203), and "Woman's Rights and Schism" (204-229). For a candid assessment of the need of women reformers to be aggressive, see Carroll Smith Rosenberg, "Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America," *American Quarterly* 23 (October 1971): 562-584.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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apocalyptic vision of the nation during its brightest days of glory and through its darkest hours of gloom.

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