David W Fletcher, February 2005

COSMOS CRUMBLING: AMERICAN REFORM AND THE RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

In *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (Oxford, 1994), Robert H. Abzug, Professor of History at the University of Texas, 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."[1] 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 "sacred" and "profane" elements of reform. Abzug purposely disclaims interest in ecclesiological, sociological, political, psychological, or theological aspects of reform and thus avoids what he feels to be the modern reductionist trend in reform studies. 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 genuine experiences of cosmological yearnings, Abzug shows

[1]Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 29. For a comparable work that looks at evangelical religion and its influence in the South during the same period, see Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separation in the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

how these "true believers" transcended the quotidian, the sectarian, and the simplistic to find sacred connections or "sacralize" the American cosmos.[2]

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–after 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.'"[3] Nonetheless, because of the far-reaching significance of the transcendent meanings these reformers brought into politics and society, Abzug believes that they "have exerted an influence on politics and society far greater than one might expect from any quantifiable measure of their popularity or resources."[4]

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

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[2]For a similar study that attempts 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, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[3]Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 4.

[4]Ibid., ix.

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."[5] Significantly, their efforts took a distinct American shape, which arose from the Constitution's proscription of the 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 arena 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 Abzug gives to women's reform movements.[6] His *Cosmos Crumbling*, which deserves a wide reading and a subsequent study on the importance of religious cosmology for the entire

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[5]Ibid., 4.

[6]See his chapters "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.

nation, propounds the theme of religious cosmology as unabashedly necessary to the function of American antebellum reform.

Religion in Jacksonian America no doubt 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 likewise 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 often was not, and is not, all that clear. 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 Christianity–nevertheless kept alive the apocalyptic vision of the nation during its brightest days of glory and through its darkest hours of gloom.