

David W Fletcher, Spring 1983

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ROSS PHARES' *BIBLE IN POCKET, GUN IN HAND:
THE STORY OF FRONTIER RELIGION*

Ross Phares' *Bible in Pocket, Gun in Hand: The Story of Frontier Religion* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1964) illustrates the various phenomena of American "backwoods religion" with lively anecdotes and stories. Basically a reflection of the "American frontier following the colonies' break with England" (p. 2; however, the setting is predominately the nineteenth century), the book covers a wide spectrum of geographical locations (although Phares had a decided interest in Texas frontier religion). The book, arranged *topically* (the Table of Contents gives a good outline) with no basic theme or overall structure to the material, seeks: (1) to *disprove* "two general misconceptions concerning religious influence in the settling of early America" (namely, "that the settlers were more devout," and "that America was settled mainly by church devotees seeking religious freedom," p. 2); and (2) to *prove* the church's strong, positive influence for the socialization, education, and moralization of the frontier in spite of the overwhelming obstacles to the contrary (e.g., "during this plastic age of the West, when it was virtually without institution of culture, learning, or law enforcement, and morals were at a low ebb, the church served as a vital stabilizing force," p. 117).

Phares does not attempt to prove (i.e., formally) any thesis with his book (there is no preface, no introduction, no conclusion), and the material flows as spontaneously and as haphazardly (at times) as the frontier life he describes (e.g., "it was usually extemporaneous—it just happened . . . all diversions from the routine of existence . . . were homemade and ad lib," p.

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46). The evaluation (on the back jacket) from *Virginia Kirkus' Bulletin*, "interpretative matter has been kept to a minimum," is correct. One would desire more interpretative data (e.g., dates, places, circumstances, and sources for numerous episodes cited; perhaps the oral character of much of this material prohibits such precise identification; see p. 97). However, additional data might cause the reader to "bog down" in the details, and the flowing moving style of the book would be lost. At any rate, bibliographical references (with excellent primary source material) are adequate, and the more critical reader can check these for further detail.

Notable strengths of Phares' work include: (1) the reader's feeling of "being there"; (2) the helpful explanatory remarks at the beginning of each section (e.g., pp. 118, 130); (3) the interesting treatment of "badmen" preachers (pp. 70ff.; especially intriguing are the psychological questions involved); (4) the balanced interpretation of revivalism in chapter seven (e.g., the camp meeting was a compelling attraction to "a society emotionally, socially, and spiritually starved," p. 77); (5) the illuminating discussion of sins subject to church disciplinary action in chapter eight; and (6) the humorous but completely realistic illustrations.

In summary, Phares' book has caused this reader to have a better understanding of the methods, manners (e.g., preaching style, attitudes toward other religious groups), and concerns of older preachers who grew up in an America very much like that described in the book. It also evokes greater appreciation for the passing of those "good 'ole days." Things certainly aren't the way they used to be, and thank God for that! *Bible in Pocket, Gun in Hand: The Story of Frontier Religion* is a fascinating little book.