David W Fletcher, Spring 2005
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CULTURAL HISTORY, RELIGION, AND CONSTRUCTION OF VALUES IN AMERICA: A BRIEF ESSAY

In a postmodern world of fragmentation and meaninglessness, cultural history may seem little more than micro history that provides a snapshot of the latest evanescent fashion. The topical window often examined by cultural historians is opened quite narrowly, even though the subject is traced over an expanded period of time. But, conversely, that window reflects the steady gaze or participation of a sizeable portion of the human family so as to be of universal appeal or ubiquitous.[1] With respect to this method of getting at the stories of history, cultural historians of religion think similarly. They take on, however, the difficult tasks of assessing "beliefs" and "values" in addition to the impenetrable ideas of "culture" and "religion."[2] For this reason, cultural historians of religion investigate complicated subjects with complex

[1]A few samples are: Jane Farrell Beck and Colleen Gau, *Uplift: The Bra in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Robert Friedel, *The Zipper: An Exploration in Novelty* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994); Robert Friedel, Paul Israel, and Bernard S. Finn, *Edison's Electric Light: Biography of an Invention*, rpt. ed. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987); Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002); Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (London: Pocket Books, 1997); Angus Trumble, *A Brief History of the Smile* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); Bennett Alan Weinberg and Bonnie K. Bealer, *The World of Caffeine: The Science and Culture of the World's Most Popular Drug* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[2]One might say that, with religious studies, the deity can be found everywhere (i.e., icons and idols, prayer helps, religious buildings, scripture texts) but can be found nowhere (i.e., physically and really); hence, the ubiquity must be discovered empirically. See John Bowker, *God: A Brief History* (London: DK Publishing, 2002); Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004); Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

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methodologies and try to assign meanings to symbols and ideas that logical positivists and structuralists long ago considered irrelevant or unattainable.[3]

Nevertheless, postmodern cultural historians have suffered little of the so-called disillusions of empiricism's failures. Since the 1970s and 1980s in the United States, cultural historians, building on the work of social historians, have reshaped the past through a gleefully subjective but painfully exacting process of reconstruction.[4] According to Carl Schorske, this process has occurred in somewhat the following way:

> Historians do not demonstrate the truth of the concepts they borrow, but only use them as a means, in order to give plausibility or cogency to the unfolding *Gestalten* in which they reconstitute a past. . . . Confined to no single domain of human experience, historians move into any terrain in search of the materials that they will organize into a temporal pattern with the help of the concepts borrowed from those fields of learning that generate them. They reconstitute the past by relativizing the particulars to the concepts and the concepts to the particulars, doing full justice to neither, yet binding and bonding

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[3]See Avrum Stroll, "Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy," and Franz Peter Hugdahl, "Poststructuralism: Derrida and Foucault," in Richard H. Popkin, ed., *Columbia History of Western Philosophy* (New York: MJF Books, 1999), 604-666, 737-744; James Thrower, *Western Atheism: A Short History* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000), 132-135; and "The End of History" in R. A. Herrera, *Reasons for Our Rhymes: An Inquiry into the Philosophy of History* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 175-185.

[4]For an extensive overview, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1988). For a negative view, see Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 1996). For a positive assessment, see "Part II: History and the Contemporary Intellectual Milieu," in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, eds., *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 35-138.

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> them into an integrated life as an account under the ordinance of time. In the tapestry the historian weaves, diachronic dynamics are the warp, synchronic relations are the woof.[5]

For historians of American religion, the woof has been nothing less than a scheme of cultural development, or Christian advancement for some, and the warp is the never ending interplay of myriad cultural forces both consequential and inconsequential.

The mix accordingly has resulted in a variety of ideas about cultural determinations and, particularly, the effects of religion on morality and the formation of values.[6] Problematic, too, for values formation has been the central issue of causal relationships. For example, what beliefs or persons affected what values? How and why did religions influence prevailing mores? And, what motivations existed in the interplay between religions and society's broader values? These questions, no doubt, have called for and received many answers. But they may be unanswerable. From a practical viewpoint, the twentieth-century continental school of philosophy known as phenomenology rendered a more satisfying solution to queries about values, their multiple representations or visualizations, and their theoretical causes.

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[5]Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking With History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 220-221. Compare "Clio's Laboratory" and "The New Cultural History" in Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 44-60, 115-118. Contrast Richard Biernacki's "Method and Metaphor after the New Cultural History" in Victoria E. Bonnell, Lynn Avery Hunt, and Richard Biernacki, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999), 62-92.

[6]John T. McGreevy, "Faith and Morals in the United States, 1865-Present," *Reviews in American History* 26, no. 1 (1998): 239-254.

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Edmund Husserl, who wrote *Logical Investigations* (1901), *Ideas* (1913), and *First Philosophy* (1924) while teaching philosophy at Halle, Goettingen, and then Freiburg in Germany, wanted to bridge the gap between empiricism and rationalism with an emphasis on the role of immediate or pure experience. By reducing the role of the observer (and the interpreter) to the real-life world of direct and immediate experience, he hoped to circumvent historical influences, metaphysical causes, or scientific assumptions and their "contamination" of the essential structures of pure experience.[7] This stripping away of causation has been problematic for strictly linear types of historical inquiry. But such truncated or reductionist methods have important benefits in terms of looking at values, how they spread through society, and how they connect with other ideas and influences. The apparent loss, by way of debasement of supposedly valuable antecedents, actually might be offset by insight gained about subtle but pervasive mechanisms of cultural legitimation that arbitrarily have validated common structures of power based on age, creed, race, and sex.[8] In their interpretations about development of the nation's

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[7]See David Carr, "Husserl and Phenomenology," and Tom Nenon, "Martin Heidegger," in Popkin, ed., *Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, 675-681, 682-691. For a good illustration of this approach, in a modified sense, to religious sites, see Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *Religious Sites in America: A Dictionary* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2000). Also, Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, new ed. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

[8]For an intriguing discussion, consult Sonya O. Rose, "Cultural Analysis and Moral Discourses: Episodes, Continuities, and Transformations," in Bonnell, Hunt, and Biernacki, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, 217-238. On the valuing of something normally debased, see Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. Nadia Bernabid and Rodolphe el-Koury (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993).

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values, historians of American religion fortunately have concentrated on this cacophony of cultural and religious significations and, instead of linear history, have emphasized what anthropologist Clifford Geertz has labeled "thick" description.[9]

For example, in *Religion and American Culture* (1990), George M. Marsden gives a good overview of basic questions about cultural and religious interactions. Although he uses a chronological format, he probes the paradox of religion's lack of cultural saturation in America. His comparison of what Americans believe (their professed worldview) with what they practice (their functional worldview) reveals an obvious disconnect. As Marsden sees it, "The central problem . . . is how the United States has always been simultaneously a very religious and very secular nation." But whether the cultural divide can be reduced to a religious/secular dichotomy or to a hierarchy of factors, like economic, social, or psychological, may not be important. He acknowledges that historians typically revert to "a unifying principle" to analyze the plethora of "forces that shape human behavior." He also reasons that, "It might be more fruitful . . . to seek a unifying principle in how the historical participants themselves understood their experience."[10]

Marsden in this way pushes his inquiry away from strict causation toward an understanding of society's underlying, assumed set of values or, in the words of Geertz, "an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols." According to Marsden, these

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[9]See "Chapter I / Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.

[10]George M. Marsden, *Religion and American Culture* (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 1-6.

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symbols and values sustain many subcultures and, in some sense, one common American culture. But he constructs his narrative from the perspective of one "inside" the Protestant mainstream. For "continuity" (a linear concept) in his history, "outside" groups like Roman Catholics, Jews, secularists, and smaller Protestant denominations have to contend with "culturally dominant Protestants." While he admits no "positive evaluation" of these cultural superiors, he concedes, "Descriptively . . . there is no escaping their significance." Yet in placing certain Protestants on center stage, he renders a value judgment and puts limits on the initiatives, triggers, and justifications of values formation. And by doing this, he fails to explore the cultural matrix more deeply.[11]

Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (1990) similarly highlights the overarching cultural impact of the Christian faith in America.[12] Butler, clinging to remnants of a narrative approach, wants to elucidate the complexity and bumptiousness of American religion from the colonial period through the Civil War era. To do so adequately, however, he must examine the cultural matrix thoroughly. Unlike Marsden, who

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[11]Ibid.

[12]Compare Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989). See also the de-christianization argument of Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001); note the critique of Eck by Philip Jenkins, "A New Religious America," *First Things: The Journal of Religion, Culture, and Public Life* 125 (August/September 2002): 25-28.

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defines religion as either faith in the transcendent as controlled by religious institutions (organized religion) or commitments and ideals as determined socially (civil religion), Butler construes religion simply as "belief in and resort to superhuman powers, sometimes beings, that determine the course of natural and human events." He thus vigorously plows the fields of American religious expression to find abundant evidence of "popular religion" or "the religious behavior of laypeople . . . defined by its clientele rather than by its theology, by its actors rather than by their acts."[13]

But as Butler well knows, religious actions represent a vital part of America's cultural heritage. As he shows, magical rites, occult observances, and other unorthodox practices and revelations informed popular values and elicited ecclesiastical censure. He alludes to rites and rituals like baptism, burial, marriage, and preaching. He talks about routines, for example, the daily ministrations of ministers, and laments the lack of evidence about this aspect of religious life in seventeenth-century America. He examines the effects of religion on the landscape, and he explores the idea that slavery led to an African spiritual holocaust. On the whole, Butler's phenomenological outlook precludes assignment of causation, since he carefully balances alternative interpretations when he reasons "why" something happened. On the other hand, his

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[13]Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 1-6.

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subtle crescendo, based on a hermeneutic of power, indicates that Butler cannot abandon totally his fixation on causation, namely, the sources of Christian ascendancy in American society.[14]

Other historians of the nation's religious culture have grappled with this problem of agency and its preclusion of deeper explorations of values construction. Three who look at the role of religious values in defining, organizing, and sustaining antebellum social efforts are Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (1994), Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (1995), and Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (1997). Each scholar approaches the religious construction of reform thematically and, of course, chronologically. But each tries to get at the big picture of religious values and their influences from a definite perspective.[15]

Abzug concentrates on a select group of New England reformers from about 1820 to 1860. He purposely avoids ecclesiological, sociological, political, psychological, and theological meanings of reform and chooses to examine religious imaginations or, specifically, cosmological yearnings. His rationale for taking this approach is to find out how reformers reshaped the

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[14]See his final chapter, "Christian Power in the American Republic," ibid., 257-288. But Butler disavows any adaptation of ethical methodologies that value religions according to their stage of evolutionary development, a la Bronislaw Malinowski.

[15]Each writer also engages in what could be called intellectual history. On intellectual history as a separate genre, see Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 7, 89, 94, 381; David A. Hollinger, "American Intellectual History: Issues for the 1980s," *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (December 1982): 306-317.

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details of everyday life and to shed light on the relationship between "sacred" and "profane" elements of reform. While it might be quibbling to dissociate this type of investigation from ecclesiastics or theology, or even sociology and psychology, Abzug creatively opens up cultural windows to explore the worldviews of his subjects.

In the spirit of Max Weber's religious virtuosos, Abzug's otherworldly reformers ponder issues like diet, manual labor, temperance, sex, and slavery. They typically reorient the discussion from a worldly viewpoint about the "natural" state to a higher spiritual plane and thereby polarize the debate among ecclesiastics in regard to the economy, gender, race, physiology, and politics. Abzug consistently is concerned with the product of each reformer's cosmic imaginations rather than the sources or results of their cultural formation. In this regard, Abzug approximates the experiential understandings of the reformers themselves in what he calls "a genealogy of reform cosmology."[16]

By way of contrast, Mintz clearly discusses his moralists, whom he dubs modernizers, with an agenda that searches for reasonable causes and results. He is careful to organize these antebellum reformers around themes that identify them as part of the American liberal tradition, for instance, the science of doing good, the politics of virtue, and liberty from corrupt custom.

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[16]Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), vii-ix, 3-8. For a study that tries 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). For a good example of a more traditional narrative, see James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

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Mintz wants to find middle ground between Marxist interpretations (reform as class-based social control) and New Left explanations (reform as benevolence in reaction to societal evils). He takes an eclectic and multi-causal approach, and with that he finds missionary or religious, humanitarian or societal, and liberationist or political impulses that inform and motivate antebellum reformers' values.

Mintz indeed paints a complex picture, as he emphasizes the diversity of the reformer's backgrounds–their geographical, social, and spiritual roots "defy simple generalization." But somehow he brings all this under the goal "to extend the meaning of the 'inalienable rights' with which all Americans are endowed and adopt a more inclusive definition of those who were 'created equal.'" This goal, Mintz thinks, is "firmly based in the American liberal tradition." Mintz looks decidedly for continuity in a linear sense to find meaning and construction of values from the reformers, a continuity that well pre-dates and post-dates their own experiences.[17]

If any of the three authors listed above could argue plausibly for causal linkage, it would be Snay. His gentleman theologians or elite southern clergy certainly speak forcefully in a visible, public arena about slavery, secession, and southern national identity in the antebellum South. And religious and political leaders in the South undoubtedly shared a common

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[17]Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), xiii-xxii, 154-156. In the first two chapters of his book, however, Mintz examines more thoroughly some of the cultural issues that relate to social breakdown and millennial beliefs. Compare the Protestant orientation given to antebellum reform by Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957).

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framework of ideas and values, symbolic and explicit, that informed the sectional conflict over slavery which led eventually to the Civil War. But at one point in his discussion, Snay cautions against strict causality, "A direct line of influence from the religious schisms to Southern politics is difficult to demonstrate." For Snay, the process of values formation evades simplistic judgments.

Snay wisely weaves his story around broad or "thick" descriptive themes such as slavery defended, slavery sanctified, harbingers of disunion, and the religious logic of secession. He understands that the relationship between spheres of religion and politics in the antebellum South is seen best as a symbiosis. He likewise finds his polite clergy implicated in the matters of secession and war by a process of "spiritualization" that sanctified slavery and produced moral consensus throughout the South. In spite of his trying to maintain some distance from causality, Snay thereby demonstrates considerably the influences of biblical or religious discourse on construction of basic values and moral judgments in the South. But he does so in a way that illuminates the personal experiences (that is, religious beliefs and understandings) of significant Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian leaders.[18]

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[18]Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South*, rpt. ed. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 1-15, 143-150, 211-218. 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).

Also, in lively story-telling style, Christine Leigh Heyrman relates the tale of Southern evangelicals, a motley mix of Baptists and Methodists that defy easy classification, who stir up the devil, corral the youth, upset clannish bonds of family, lord it over the women, and gain mastery of patriarchal males. Heyrman explores the variety of religious beliefs (and disbeliefs) in the nation's first hundred years by a thorough and engaging look at evangelical penetration of

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Some cultural historians do not focus on religious concerns per se but do elucidate questions of moral import for the nation, especially modern America. In *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (1985), David Horowitz juxtaposes social, economic, and intellectual facets of consumerism with their concurrent ethical meanings. He realizes that the moral consequences (a causal concept) of comfort, affluence, and luxury have worried both secular and religious observers of American society. Horowitz cuts a swath across America's economy and looks at evidence as diverse as intellectual critiques, household budgets, and labor trends. He squeezes a vast array of data from his sources, indicates how it was interpreted in a variety of ways, and catalogs America's spending habits and their effect on class identity in the early twentieth century. His "cultural artifacts" from middle-class magazine articles, advertisements, and advice columns not only show how Americans in this period experienced changes in the economy but also how intellectuals thought about the economy's value, or lack thereof.

According to Horowitz, the emergent standards of living produced an ambivalence (i.e., blessing versus curse) in the prevailing culture, since material prosperity brought many out of poverty but, at the same time, weakened the nation's moral foundations. By revealing this, even though he omits evidence from economists, politicians, and preachers, Horowitz does offer an important evaluation of a slice of America's popular, consumer culture. This ambiguity in

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and interference with life and culture in the South. See her *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

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Americans' thinking about consumerism further reflects a genuine angst experienced by many citizens, as they struggled with the vestiges of older, inhibiting values about money. For sure, Horowitz does not plan to reason causally from material prosperity to moral weakness, but his laying economic data and intellectual critiques side by side does create that impression.[19]

Another trio of scholars, who cannot break away from issues of causality, assess traditional Christianity's confrontation with the various forces of modernity and the uncertainty it engendered in America during the twentieth century. George M. Marsden's *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (1980), James Gilbert's *Redeeming Culture: American Religion in an Age of Science* (1997), and Robert Wuthnow's *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (1988) scrutinize the long-running dispute between religious fundamentalism and scientific modernism. Each looks at a slightly different chronological framework for the controversy–Marsden from 1870 to about 1925, Gilbert from about 1925 to the 1960s, and Wuthnow from the mid-1940s to the mid-1980s. And each deals with the meaning of values, especially for religious identity, in quite distinct ways.

Marsden, who is moderately concerned with causation, believes that the evangelical reaction to modernism in religious circles and the nation's intellectual culture should be seen

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[19]Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). For a treatment of Protestant attitudes toward economics during the antebellum period, see Mark A. Noll, ed., *God and Mammon: Protestants, Money, and the Market, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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primarily as a religious phenomenon. He is intent on discovering how fundamentalism, in its evolution, underwent important cultural and social transformations that produced a peculiar type of evangelical Christianity in America. In the thinking of many Christian conservatives, modernism and evolution had sabotaged the biblical roots and values of American civilization and had created a dire spiritual crisis. In their view, the old order based on faith and the Bible had succumbed to skepticism, rationalism, and Darwinism. Marsden meticulously shows how evangelicals responded and refashioned a new identity as religious fundamentalists. He does not ignore intellectual, social, and political repercussions of fundamentalist culture, but he wants to highlight what key leaders in the movement experienced from their belief-oriented or religious perspective. Marsden does this quite well, but like Gilbert and Wuthnow he neglects ethnic minorities and women and, consequently, the critical role of race and gender in the determination of evangelical and fundamentalist identity.[20]

Wuthnow, who is greatly concerned with causation, paints his religious mosaic with broad brush strokes in order to get at the restructuring of religion in twentieth-century America–from an older “fundamentalism” versus “modernism” to the recent “conservatism” versus “liberalism.” His sociological overview adopts a topical approach that relies heavily on surveys and statistics and discredits the standard evolutionary model of secularization of the

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[20]George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3-8, 199-228. Compare Margaret Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1996); Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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nation's values.[21] For cultural history, Wuthnow's contribution lies in his ability to overlay sweeping cultural and social changes in America's religious experience. Unfortunately, Wuthnow intends to do more with cultural structures and symbols (such as gestures, morals, and rituals) than he actually accomplishes. He does talk a lot about "symbolic boundaries," but his adherence to institutional interactions, similar to both Marsden and Gilbert, leaves the cultural dynamics of personal experience for the most part unexplored. This experience of social organizations at best relegates as inconsequential many personal expressions of belief and faith–the very stuff that allows for rich analysis of religion's phenomenology and values formation.[22]

Like Marsden and Wuthnow, Gilbert, who is the least concerned with causation, does not completely break away from an institutional framework for his cultural queries. Gilbert explores religion's clash and collusion with science in "public culture" to see how America's modern, secular society has accommodated or opened up cultural space for religious ideas and values (and visa versa). This goal necessarily obligates Gilbert to wrestle with the fundamentalist/modernist dichotomy, yet he conducts his investigation by way of an impressionistic portrait of

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[21]For a good, brief overview of distinct methodologies, see Paula S. Fass, "Cultural History / Social History: Some Reflections on a Continuing Dialogue," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 39-46.

[22]Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 3-13.

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representative episodes from a variety of contexts, each with its own circumstances and set of actors. This helps Gilbert probe keenly into American religion's cultural effusion.

Gilbert garners cultural data from phenomena such as a monkey trial, cosmological films, UFOs and flying saucers, and sermons from science. The processes of values formation or cultural integration, he thinks, are rapid, unpredictable, but dramatic and similar to individuals and groups responding "to questions that discharge like sheet lightning across the sky." As a result of his research, he concludes that the cultural product is complex and jumbled but integrative. He reasons that, for the period of his study, scientists and religionists conducted a "joint venture" to bring about a "new religious-scientific dispensation." This collusion, similar to Wuthnow's restructuring, altered values and worldviews for both religionists and scientists and played an important role in America's cultural adjustments to modernism and postmodernism. But whether Gilbert's actors actually experienced and articulated this collusion or, conversely, remained "loyal" to older identities and values needs to be evaluated more thoroughly. Gilbert conceivable has superimposed post facto his own agenda of cultural formation on the historic record.[23]

Values formation no doubt will remain a difficult area of study for historians of American culture and religion. In theory, the synchronic look or culture as symbol and meaning will

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[23]James Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture: American Religion in an Age of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1-20. For a contrasting study from the opposite perspective of unbelief, except covering an earlier America up to 1890, see James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

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conflict with the diachronic look or culture as action and practice. That debate among cultural historians may well continue in the twenty-first century.[24] But each approach may not be exclusive of the other. As seen above, scholars who intensely probe America's cultural matrix still maintain some sense of cause and effect. They realize that ideas about causes are part of the culture as well. As such, these connecting links, just like the phenomena of symbols and their meanings, are worthy of notice and study. In a world of postmodern eclecticism and illogic, both can persist together.

[24]For a good discussion, see William H. Sewell, Jr., "The Concept(s) of Culture," in Bonnell, Hunt, and Biernacki, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, 35-61.

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