

ESSAY REVIEW

Nineteenth-Century Protestantism

Mission For Life: The Story of the Family of Adoniram Judson, The Dramatic Events of the First American Foreign Mission, and the Course of Evangelical Religion in the Nineteenth Century. By JOAN JACOBS BRUMBERG. (New York: The Free Press, 1980. xvi, 302p. Illustrations, bibliography, index. \$12.95.)

Mormonism and the American Experience. By KLAUS J. HANSEN. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. xviii, 257p. Sources, index. \$15.00.)

Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783-1837. By FRED J. HOOD. (University, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 1980. viii, 254p. Bibliography, index. \$21.50.)

Most American Protestant churchpeople of the nineteenth century were heterogeneous in their ecclesiastical and theological connections (Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists), yet they were also voluntaristic in church organization, usually pietistical, and all were intensely activist—especially in their desire, literally, to convert the world to their special brand of religion. They were “evangelicals.” Thus the term “evangelical Protestantism” has been adopted by many historians as the simplest yet most appropriate phrase to apply to the principal Protestant groups in this country a century ago. A massive cultural and institutional phenomenon, evangelical Protestantism rested at the base of nineteenth-century American society and shaped its inner workings much as did Puritanism in colonial America.

The study of nineteenth-century evangelicalism is not an “in” topic of historical research these days. Yet in recent years, in unobtrusive ways, small bands of historians have been slowly expanding and deepening our understanding of this subject. The work of William McLoughlin stands out. McLoughlin has made major contributions to our understanding of American revivalism, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He has also shown how nineteenth-century Protestant leaders like Charles G. Finney and the Beecher family articulated popular religious assumptions and how Protestant missionaries’ relations with the Indians revealed a great deal about the treatment of minorities in the ante-bellum era. Specialists in the recently emerging field of women’s history have also suggested the key role women played in the evangelical Protestant community and how religious beliefs shaped women’s views of nineteenth-century society and their special place in it. In two studies

focused on towns in New York and Pennsylvania, a prominent anthropologist and a young historian have made explicit the nexus existing between evangelical Protestantism and the burgeoning, acquisitive industrial capitalism which had begun to shape this country by the 1830s. And Daniel Howe has edited a collection of essays which suggests the numerous ways in which Protestantism influenced American culture.¹ These recent publications are just a few examples of a small but important body of historical literature which traces ever more clearly the outlines of nineteenth-century evangelicalism and which points to the central role evangelical Protestants played in the life of nineteenth-century America. All of the books under scrutiny in this review are valuable additions to that body of scholarship.

Fred J. Hood's *Reformed America* merits attention for several reasons. First, it is valuable because it examines the early years of evangelicalism, when basic attitudes, organizational patterns, and group assumptions were being formed. Relatively few scholars have attempted to study in detail the formative era of evangelicalism, the post-Revolution years extending through the first third of the nineteenth century. Again William McLoughlin was a pioneer in this regard, in his magisterial two-volume study of the Baptists in New England. But there are no other comparable studies of Protestantism in the early national period. Hood's monograph is a welcome addition.

This book is also important because of the particular religious tradition it seeks to analyze. "Reformed" church groups—those Protestants who looked back to John Calvin for doctrinal and ecclesiastical guidance—were key elements in the make-up of nineteenth-century American Protestantism. The Reformed tradition served as the principal intellectual link between Puritanism in colonial America and nineteenth-century evangelicalism. Several of the most numerous and influential of the mainstream evangelical groups—Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists—were rooted in this religious tradition. Yet curiously those scholars who have chosen to generalize about the evangelicals have taken the Methodists as models, stressing emotional reviv-

¹ William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald Press, 1959); *The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher: An Essay on the Shifting Values of Mid-Victorian America, 1840-1870* (New York: Knopf, 1970); "Cherokees and Methodists, 1824-1834," *Church History*, 50 (March, 1981), 44-63; Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1977); Kathryn K. Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1973); Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1978); Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Daniel Howe, ed., *Victorian America* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania Press, 1976).

alism and arminian theological emphases as normative.² Hood's study brings a needed balance into our efforts to understand the evangelicals. He stresses the rational, disciplined manner, typical of Calvin's followers, in which Reformed ministers reflected on religious concerns as they related to the broad sweep of American life in the early nineteenth century. Hood emphasizes especially the relationship of the Reformed tradition to public issues such as civil and religious liberty, republican government, and the application of the idea of the millennium and the doctrine of providence to early nineteenth-century American experience. After reading Hood's extended essay we can grasp anew something of the complexity of nineteenth-century religious experience, of the diversity of religious traditions which constituted the seemingly monolithic evangelical Protestant world.

There are weaknesses in Hood's presentation. The writing is too often convoluted and frustratingly unclear—"dissertationese" perhaps. The author's claims of uniqueness for Reformed thinkers of the Middle Atlantic and Southern states is not entirely convincing, and his concentration on the writing and words of Reformed *ministers* raises questions about the representatives of these views as they apply to rank and file Presbyterians, Baptists, and/or Dutch Reformed churchgoers. But certainly he has made clear the crucial contribution the Reformed church groups made to the shaping of nineteenth-century evangelicalism, and we are in his debt for that.

Joan Brumberg's *Mission for Life* views evangelical Protestantism from a different perspective. She uses a prominent evangelical family, that of Adoniram Judson (a famous Baptist missionary to Burma), his several wives, and their children as a vehicle for examining the changing course of American religion over more than three quarters of a century. This is not the first time this technique has been used by a professional historian—Marie Caskey's excellent recent study of the Beecher family comes immediately to mind—but it is an effective way to combine the immediacy of biography with analysis of broad historical trends.³

Brumberg stresses, correctly I think and far more strongly than Hood, the key importance to all evangelicals of the necessity of the individual conversion experience. This fact is central to any understanding of the intense examination

² The full title of McLoughlin's study is: *New England Dissent, 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (2 vols., Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1971). One of the earliest suggestions that Methodists were most representative of all evangelicals is in Sidney Mead's article, "Prof. Sweet's *Religion and Culture in America*: A Review Article," *Church History*, 22 (March, 1953), 33-49.

³ Marie Caskey, *Chariot of Fire: Religion and the Beecher Family* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1978).

of the inner lives of potential and actual evangelicals which invariably occurred. Hood, by contrast, downplays these Puritan-Reformed practices. The emphasis upon the conversion experience also helps to explain why evangelicals stressed the emotions and piety and thus why revivals became so central in the daily religious life of nineteenth-century American Protestants. Finally, stress upon individual conversions led to intense missionary activism. The evangelicals literally attempted to convert the world, and Brumberg's monograph provides us with one lively account of that activity. This study is especially useful because it draws attention to the overseas dimensions of evangelical activism. The home missionary efforts of American evangelicals have been thoroughly examined by historians and effectively related to the broad themes of nineteenth-century American religious and cultural history. Relatively little attention, however, has been paid to American contributions to world-wide western missionary efforts throughout the nineteenth century. Brumberg's account points to the naiveté and the cultural arrogance associated with these activities, the almost touching simplicity with which Adoniram Judson and his family risked their lives in the hope they might convert the "heathen" of Burma. We need more studies like this to flesh out fully the picture of American contributions to nineteenth-century cultural imperialism.

Brumberg also uses the Judson family to illuminate other aspects of evangelical life. Her analysis of the Judson hagiography—adulatory evangelical biographies—demonstrates what effective propagandists these people were with the written word at the popular level. Brumberg's amusingly skeptical account of Adoniram's selection in his later years of a popular female novelist with social pretensions and a wide reading audience as his third wife further underscores this evangelical trait. The author also pays considerable attention to the Judson women, and offers comments on the now-familiar theme of the major role women played in evangelical affairs. Her conclusions in this regard are perhaps more positive and constructive about what evangelical faith and practice did for women's self-esteem than is the case in most other analyses of this issue. Brumberg's final two chapters suggest something of the travails evangelical Protestantism went through at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century as the traditional religious synthesis began to fall apart. (An "Afterword," commenting briefly on present day evangelicalism, seems an awkward and unnecessary intrusion and would have best been omitted.) Brumberg focuses first on a daughter of Adoniram who became a spiritualist, and then on a son who founded in New York City the famous Judson Memorial Church, designed to minister to the new urban poor of industrial America. The author's analysis of Edward Judson's relationship with the Rockefeller family is most instructive concerning the declining fortunes of the evangelical community.

Like many historians today, Brumberg turns occasionally to the social sciences for analytical techniques and interpretive insights. She is not heavy-handed in these efforts, only lightly sprinkling her footnotes with appropriate references. In *Mormonism and the American Experience* Klaus Hansen utilizes the interdisciplinary tools of the social sciences more than Brumberg, all to good effect. Despite the limited space provided by the format of the Chicago History of American Religion series, Hansen has managed to construct a thoughtful and stimulating essay on a large and complex topic. In one sense the Mormons were not a part of the evangelical community. Their written sources of authority, their early political, economic, and sexual practices were a continuous threat and challenge to the evangelicals. Yet Hansen is able to illuminate indirectly the evangelical world even as he discusses in detail the ideas and the culture of a religious group whom the evangelicals viewed as mortal enemies. He demonstrates, for example, the frequent common cultural sources of Mormons and evangelicals. Mormonism originated in western New York in the 1820s, the "burned over district" that was also a powerful center of evangelical activism throughout the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Mormons and evangelicals also shared a common need to "return" to some form of primitive Christianity. The reader can draw from Hansen's account a sense of how Mormonism served almost as an alter ego to evangelicalism—deeply antagonistic in many of its attitudes and practices, yet at the same time much alike and sprung from the same soil.

Yet one must also acknowledge the importance of Hansen's efforts to elucidate the uniqueness of Mormonism, and his ability to pick a reasoned, careful path through the thicket of controversy which still lies athwart any and all discussion of this subject. The author's consideration of the origins of Mormonism seems a model both in the art of properly sifting confusing historiographical and historical evidence to reach a convincing conclusion, and in his cautious yet effective use of social science theories in trying to explain how Joseph Smith was able to write about, interpret, and organize as he did a new religious faith and order. This book consists of a series of mini-essays on separate topics, not a chronological survey of Mormon history. Thus Hansen avoids repeating familiar details recorded voluminously by other historians, yet he also says something fresh about his subject. The chapters on Mormon attitudes towards death, and American race relations, and the author's explanation of how Mormons have moved from pariahs within the larger society to super-Americans in the twentieth century were especially thoughtful commentaries.

Hansen has omitted almost all references to the missionary work the Mormons have carried on worldwide, practices begun by the middle of the nineteenth century. Although the focus of analysis is on the American exper-

ience, these missionary endeavors were a significant part of Mormon history and should not be ignored. Through comparison and contrast Hansen might have used the history of these missionary enterprises to illuminate key aspects of Mormon life in this country. There are a few brief observations of this sort (pp. 130-32, and especially 202-04), but the analytical potential of such passages is never realized fully.

Evangelical Protestantism and offshoots like Mormonism constituted a complicated and powerful force in American life a hundred years ago. These three books cannot begin to tell us all that it is possible to know about our nineteenth-century religious heritage, but they do suggest in a variety of ways how important religious faith and practice was for millions of Americans then. It is appropriate that we be reminded occasionally of that fact, and be able to reflect upon its significance. These three solidly constructed historical studies provide one means to that end.

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