

Religious Themes in American Culture

Illusions of Innocence: Protestantism in America, 1630-1875 by Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen. Foreword by Robert M. Bellah (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), xviii, 296 pp., \$29.95.

The Democratization of American Christianity by Nathan O. Hatch (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), xiv, 312 pp., 29.95.

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THE WRITERS OF THESE BOOKS, with painstaking research, have produced studies that may help the present generation understand American history and culture just as Perry Miller and Henry Nash Smith aided understanding a generation ago.

After working for twelve years on *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875*, Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen have provided an insightful volume about the impact of primitivism on a large segment of the American population. For more than 350 years, many Americans have believed in a myth of "first times," when the church—or for some, society—at one time was pure and perfect. These believers felt that it was their responsibility to restore this primordial existence. The myth of "first times" ranges widely from Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine in earlier days to the contemporary scholar, Allan Bloom. The authors contend that the millennialism, a doctrine regarding the second coming of Christ, so evident during the early years of the Republic, was predicated on the restoration of the primordial past and that historians have overlooked such an understanding of millennialism. Hughes and Allen have chosen to study four religious groups: Puritans, Baptists, Mormons, and the "Christian" movement

led by Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell, and others.

Hughes and Allen have identified several ways that faith in the primitive ideal has influenced American attitudes and public policy. The myth has provided a rationale and justification for American manifest destiny and imperialism. For example, looking to nature and the book of Genesis, some found justification for taking Indian lands and territory from Mexico. John Quincy Adams asserted "that the Genesis account of creation 'is the foundation not only of our title to the territory of Oregon, but the foundation of all human title to all human possession' " (p. 214). To many Americans, the Spanish-American War had more "to do with extending the 'Laws of Nature and of Nature's God' " than with imperialism (p. 217). Even some involved in missionary activity during the nineteenth century failed to recognize that their goals in the mission field were no different from the nation's goals. The implicit imperialism in their world view was something they very likely would have denied.

While yet in manuscript form, *The Democratization of American Christianity* won for Nathan O. Hatch the Albert C. Outler Prize in Ecumenical Church History awarded by the American Society of Church History. Hatch focused his attention on five discrete religious groups: Christian churches, black churches, Mormons, Methodists, and Baptists. Between 1780 and 1830, common people moved into the political process and, by the tens of thousands, joined these religious communities. Part of a populist movement that appealed to the unlettered, they were led by capable, forceful, and intelligent men of their own kind who held their trust.

The democratization process came about when ordinary people assumed responsibility for working out their own salvation without the oversight of the established churches. No longer would they accept the stricture of creeds and tra-

ditions or the direction of a highly educated clergy. This process had "less to do with the specifics of polity and governance and more to do with the incarnation of the church into popular culture" (p. 9).

Revivals, gospel music, the printing press, and the camp meeting all played a part in making the churches democratic. The Second Great Awakening did much to divide the American clergy between those who sought a noncreedal religion and those who ministered to the established churches. The success of the revivalistic clergy "may have been the most profoundly democratic upheaval in the early republic" (p. 226) (although Charles G. Finney, the leading evangelist during the Awakening, appealed also to congregations in the established churches, whom he influenced to democratize their churches).

By the early nineteenth century, the Christian Churches movement called "for a populist hermeneutic premised on the inalienable right of every person to understand the New Testament for him- or herself" (p. 73). Although in time, the Christian Churches developed their own theology, the belief that religious truth had to come from the people has continued to be an important legacy of their movement.

The Methodist move toward democratization came through lay preachers and the elimination of formal trappings. The Baptist preacher John Leland sounded like Thomas Jefferson when he argued against the value of creeds. He saw the common people as more like those who were attracted to Jesus during his ministry.

Following the Revolutionary War, large numbers of blacks were converted to Christianity. Black churches taught their members that they should be free and offered them dignity. When black ministers took charge of black congregations and successfully filled their pulpits, an important juncture in the history of the democratization of American Christianity had occurred.

After considering Joseph Smith's life and categorizing him as a visionary populist, Hatch gives considerable attention to the Book of Mormon. He contends that recent interpretations have failed to understand that the Book of Mormon made a strong case against the powerful, the rich, and the educated.

These two excellent books provide a comprehensive survey of an important but limited segment of religion in American history. At times each of these studies moves into the territory of the other. In one case, Hughes and Allen point out that certain churches in the South interpreted primordial times to justify slavery and, later, segregation; while Hatch presents evidence that the same churches were democratized by the influence of their black members. In another case, Hatch's study of the Methodists indicates clearly that they could have been included in Hughes and Allen's study of primitivism in American history.

Hughes, Allen, and Hatch have made here important contributions to the understanding of religion in American history, buttressing the argument that any effort to separate the study of religion from our understanding of society is to do violence to American culture.

BRIEF NOTICES

"Wild Bill" Hickman and the Mormon Frontier by Hope A. Hilton (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), xii, 144 pp., index, \$9.95.

LOOKING BACK at the early days of the

Church in the West, it is often difficult to sort out just what kind of lives our forebears lived. How much "wild West" was there in the West, how much frontier experience, and how much was tempered by the efforts of Church members to