

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-