BOOK REVIEWS


Using the Cortland County as the locus for his case study of the burned-over district, Curtis Johnson explores the dynamics of rural revivalism and congregational life in upstate New York in the antebellum period. He stresses how the evangelical churches (specifically, the Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians) initially cultivated "an island mentality," especially through the use of church discipline that accentuated evangelical separateness from the world and that emphasized the corporate authority of the church body over individual members. He also underlines the importance of revivalism for church growth in the period and the instrumental significance of the new measures. Johnson highlights as well the embattled position of evangelicalism in the region. Far from hegemonic in their influence, the evangelical churches were in keen competition with the unchurched majority and with rivals such as the Episcopalians and the Universalists. Johnson finds further evidence of evangelical difficulties in the growing resistance to church discipline; by the 1850s it had largely ceased to function in an effective way and had been greatly circumscribed. Additionally, ultraist causes undermined evangelical unity as they divided churches and led into various benevolent byways. On the eve of the Civil War, where Johnson leaves off his narrative, the evangelical churches of the Cortland County had little of their island mentality left and were happily at home with the wider culture. They had become, by Johnson's argument, "modern" churches.

One of the dominant themes of Johnson's study is revivalism and its causes. He persuasively shows the shortcomings of applying prevalent socioeconomic explanations, based on Marxist presuppositions about emergent class relations in a free labor economy, to a rural and agrarian setting like Cortland County. For Johnson's part, he develops a three-fold causative picture for the evangelical awakening in Cortland: the "Arminianization" of evangelism, the extensive involvement of women in promoting local revivals, and the institutional needs of the churches—particularly the need to maintain membership in the face of out-migration. Johnson's reflections on the causes of revivalism are measured, well-reasoned, and carefully revisionist, but one is left here, as in so many other discussions of this issue, with a sense that the question itself has been overworked and is perhaps outworn. With their insistent focus on what explains awakenings and revivals, historians have too often lost sight of the subtle complexities of evangelical experience, devotion, and worship. Johnson orients a large part of his study along the familiar lines of causation and explanation, leaving much of the texture of evangelical life—for
example, protracted meetings, prayer societies, daily devotions, alter calls, inquiry rooms, or transformative experiences of conversion—in the shadows.

Still this is a wonderfully executed piece of social history. In particular, Johnson's analysis of the gradual erosion of church discipline is highly revealing. His work shows anew that a case study—here of the records of twenty-three congregations in one county—can speak in a very illuminating manner to such large issues as the widening impact of an individualistic ethic and the changing contours of ecclesiastical authority.

LEIGH ERIC SCHMIDT
Drew University


This is an excellent reference work. It contains approximately 2400 articles and 1500 biographical entries written by 400 well qualified contributors. It is indispensable for school and church libraries. Its price, relatively speaking, also makes it affordable for persons interested in American religious history to have in their personal libraries.

An introductory essay briefly describes the traditional major periods in American church history and a short bibliography suggests further resources. The articles are cross-referenced and also have brief bibliographies. Methodist topics and personalities are well represented throughout the volume.

There are, of course, several other "dictionaries" of church history, but this one is unique for its complete and thorough focus on North America.

CHARLES YRIGOYEN, JR.
Madison, NJ


This is an outstanding book, clearly deserving the 1988 Albert C. Outler Prize in Ecumenical Church History awarded by the American Society of Church History. The volume combines everything one would expect from good historical study—a clear, supportable thesis, excellent research and documentations, and an engaging style.
Hatch argues that the period "between 1780 and 1830 left as indelible an imprint upon the structures of American Christianity as it did upon those of American political life" (p. 6). The central force in the development of Christianity in America during this period was its democratic or populist orientation.

Hatch examines five religious traditions which he claims reveal the spirit of this "religious populism"—the Christian movement, Methodism, the Baptists, the black churches, and the Mormons. It is his purpose to show in these traditions how "ordinary folk came to distrust leaders of genius and talent and to defend the right of common people to shape their own faith and submit to leaders of their own choosing" (p. 14).

Methodists loom large in this study. Francis Asbury, George Whitefield, Richard Allen, Freeborn Garrettson, Lorenzo Dow, Peter Cartwright, James O'Kelly, Nicholas Snethen and others occupy important places in the story.

Hatch discusses the use of lay itinerants, vernacular preaching, the evolution of popular religious literature, the camp meeting, early gospel music, and the emphasis on private judgment in matters of religion to amplify his thesis.

Students of American religious history and Methodist history will find this an exciting book. It is not only informative, but it also offers most enjoyable reading.

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