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James D. Bratt. *Antirevivalism in Antebellum America: A Collection of Religious Voices.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006. xxxi + 278 pp. $62.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-3693-4.

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Criticizing the Religion of the Republic: Antirevivalism in Antebellum America

James D. Bratt has assembled a noisy array of antirevivalist "voices" from one of the most lively periods in American religious history. While many of the primary sources are well known to historians–contributions from Horace Bushnell and Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example–there are lesser known offerings from critics who struggled, often quite personally, with the beliefs and practices associated with revivals. We hear from sturdy orthodox Presbyterians like Albert Dod, Particular Baptists like Ephraim Perkins, German Lutherans like Friedrich C. D. Wyneken, black preachers like Daniel Alexander Payne, and a spiritualist and psychologist like La Roy Sunderland. One of the delights of the volume is that we also hear some critical reappraisals from leading revivalists themselves, including Charles Finney and Phoebe Palmer.

Bratt hopes that by listening to this diverse group the reader might better understand the tensions and conflicts surrounding a distinctive feature in American religion and, indeed the nation as a whole. If, indeed, revivalism contributed to an emerging ethos of independence, a democratic populism, a sense of identity as well as moral order, it is important to know who resisted and why. According to Bratt, "objections to revivals were warning signs of discontent or failure in what [the] nation had become" (p. xiv). But antirevivalism after 1840 was also an indicator of the future, as the machinery and fervor of revivalism routinized, waned, or disappeared altogether in some arenas of American religious life.

In surveying the material, Bratt recognizes a stage-like development of antirevivalist sentiment. The first critics–ranging from prorevival moderates to antagonistic outsiders, especially Unitarians–focused primarily on the perceived excesses of Finney's New Measures as they took shape in the 1820s. Then came the "insider-gone-outsider" critique in the mid-1830s, prompted in large part by Finney's "manual-cum-apologia," *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835). By the mid-1840s, public scandals and internal conflict within Methodism caused many to look more closely at religious experience itself–"its true and false faces, its lasting and fleeting inducements, its absence or disappointments, and what was to be done in the wake thereof" (p. xviii). To finish out the period, Bratt also acquaints the reader with "rehabilitators," who

merely sought to reform revival practices, not eliminate them, and "renegades," who not only abandoned revivalism, but left evangelical Christianity altogether. The five parts of the book correspond with these temporal categories, providing a chronological sequence that is simultaneously topical as well.

Throughout the book, several major themes recur with striking frequency. The most common source of complaint against revival practice had to do with the "enthusiasm" surrounding conversion. Charges of "fanaticism" and manipulation were accompanied by stories of personal turmoil associated with the requisite emotions of spiritual rebirth. Lutheran observer Friedrich C. D. Wyneken observed how participants often doubted the validity of their faith because they had not experienced the "outpouring," especially the "feeling of grace," that revival preachers upheld as normative at the mourner's bench (p. 113). Harriet Beecher Stowe recalled in her novel, *Oldtown Folks* (1869), how a lead character fell into a "state of hopeless gloom and despondency" because she had failed to undergo that "certain emotional experience" which her father had come to expect of genuine converts. Stowe's very evident questioning of the need for this experience and the oppressive sense of "unperformed duty" with which it was associated was echoed in the theological treatises of John Williamson Nevin and Horace Bushnell in the 1840s. Nevin focused on the theological dimensions of this struggle, noting the importance of more objective means of assurance in the church and its "faithful, systematic" ministries of word and sacrament. Bushnell found steadiness of purpose and nurturing piety in the "domestic spirit" of the home. Both challenged the individualism and volatility of revivalism and, in so doing, provided a thoughtful rejection of the anxious bench. Polity and liturgy were inevitable topics of concern in these discussions, inspiring new appeals for education, catechesis, and, ultimately and more formally, even catholic alternatives to the hot-house spirituality of revivalism. Orestes Brownson's conversion to Catholicism provides a fitting conclusion to this emerging theme in the 1850s, but his move was anticipated, in rather interesting ways, by Daniel Alexander Payne, who called for "dignified, biblical religion" in his own African Methodist Episcopal Church.

There are some surprises awaiting the attentive reader and perhaps even the seasoned historian. Finney's late-in-life regret for preaching exclusively on the conversion of sinners, while neglecting the church and the attainment of a more "permanent spirituality" shows how much his mind changed over a long and eventful career. Then there is Mormon founder Joseph Smith's recollection of an early vision in the midst of a Methodist-inspired revival in his "burned-over" district of upstate New York. It was not the "unusual excitement" of the revival itself that stirred his emotions, but the "strife of words and context about opinions" that arose as preachers from the various "sects" swept the land (p. 207). There is some irony in discovering that Methodism was a major factory or, at least, context of quintessentially American spin-offs ranging from Mormonism to Seventh-Day Adventism. Revivalism was the source of much of this energy and creativity, transcending all sorts of racial, social, and cultural boundaries in the process, but it also caused deep division and bitter rejection. Yet, one of the strongest antirevivalist polemicists, Orestes Brownson, reminds us that revival fervor had some influence even in the Catholic "missions" that enlivened Catholic devotion in the mid-nineteenth century.

Bratt's twenty chapters provide readings that average ten-pages in length, most of them accessible to a general audience and highly suitable as a primary-source collection for college-level instruction. His chapter introductions provide helpful frameworks for the readings, with only the occasional hint of his own Reformed bias showing through. The volume would be an excellent resource for anyone interested in the history of religious revivals. Since this phenomenon was transatlantic in scope, it would be interesting to see a similar volume featuring antirevivalist literature from the other side of the pond. Overall, this book is invaluable for anyone interested in how revivals came to be a distinctively American phenomenon, and a contested one at that.