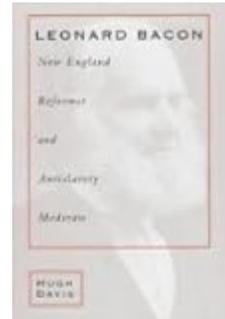


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Hugh Davis. *Leonard Bacon: New England Reformer and Antislavery Moderate.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998. xi + 293 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2287-7.



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Within the Congregational community of the nineteenth century, Leonard Bacon commanded a degree of respect that few of his colleagues could match. Beginning with his pastorate at New Haven's Center Church during the 1820s and lasting through his death in 1881, Bacon contributed to the intellectual life of the Church through his writings, his editorial work on various publications, and his positions of leadership within the clerical councils. Until now, however, he has lacked a detailed biography. In this well-crafted study, Hugh Davis fills the need for a biography of Bacon and provides a valuable resource to anyone interested in religion or reform within the nineteenth century. Davis skillfully examines both manuscript collections and printed works to provide a portrait of the person as well as a description of Bacon's role within the mid-nineteenth century community.

Bacon began his professional career at New Haven's Center Church, one of the most important communities within the antebellum Congregationalists, and he remained within the church throughout his entire professional career. His pulpit enabled him to reach many of Connecticut's most prominent citizens, and he expanded his influence through extensive writings within the religious publications of the time. During his career he served as an editor and/or contributor to the *Christian Spectator*, the *Quarterly Christian Spectator*, the *New Eng-*

lander, and the *Independent*, plus miscellaneous other publications. In short, he was a formidable influence upon New England Congregationalism from the mid-1820s to the 1870s.

His career, especially during the early years, came at a time when the New England Congregationalists were vigorously promoting a variety of benevolence societies and social reform. Bacon joined in these efforts but, Davis emphasizes, always with a sense of moderation. He supported tract and missionary societies, along with other popular activities of the era. He supported temperance activities, although not endorsing the position that alcohol was always sinful. Like most American Protestants of his time, he considered the Roman Catholic Church as a threat to the nation and its religion, but without the vitriolic language of the more vehement anti-Catholic writers.

Bacon's penchant for moderation is most evident in his writing about slavery. Indeed his moderation led to some inconsistent arguments, as well as criticisms from both abolitionists and conservative clergy. He very much wanted for the South to end slavery, but on its own volition. He did not join the view that all slaveholding was sinful, and he held in the possibility of a Christian slave owner. Moreover, he was an active supporter of colonization during the opening phases of the debate over

abolition. Through the course of the 1840s and 1850s, the prospect of slavery extending into the West caused Bacon to lose sympathy for the South. In short, his moderation produced inconsistencies that contributed to accusations of being pro-slavery.

Theologically, Bacon could be classified with the New Haven theologians, such as Nathaniel William Taylor. He distrusted the conservatives, and he was distressed by the Presbyterian schism. He is well remembered for the comment that the difference between Taylor and Tyler was "the letter a." During his later years he became one of Horace Bushnell's few supporters.

Well into the second half of the nineteenth century, Bacon remained an elder statesman of the Congregational community. He remained active politically and in the religious affairs of the community, most notably during Henry Ward Beecher's trial for adultery.

Hugh Davis presents us with a workmanlike biography. His extensive research and balanced judgement allow him to portray both the public and private sides of his subject. The writing is clear and direct. If I absolutely must do some nitpicking, I might suggest better explanations of such terms as the Plan of Union or the Saybrook Platform. Otherwise I can find very little to criticize.

As I have suggested in my own work *Children of Wrath*, the New School Congregationalists and Presbyterians played a critical role in the formulation of antebellum reform movements. In this admirable work, Davis has presented a portrait of an important member of this community. His book will be an important resource for anyone interested in U.S. religious or social history.

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