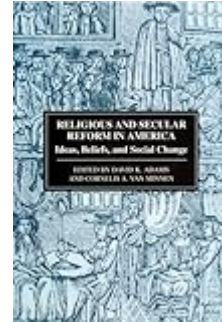


David K. Adams, Cornelis A. Van Minnen, eds. *Religious and Secular Reform in America: Ideas, Beliefs and Social Change*. New York: New York University Press, 1999. xiv + 273 pp. \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-0686-2; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-0685-5.



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Published on H-AmRel (March, 2000)

One of the criticisms often leveled at some American scholars, especially historians, is that they are overly insular and see little need to place their work in an international or trans-Atlantic context. Another, too-often fair accusation is that American historians have little interest in becoming familiar with the work of non-American specialists on American topics. Many hallowed and near-legendary historiographical essays take little notice of the vast amount of work done outside of American universities. A welcome corrective to this tendency is David K. Adams and Cornelis A. Van Minnen's collection of twelve essays that cover the history of American religious and secular reform from the eighteenth century into the late twentieth. Since nearly all of the authors are scholars working outside of the United States, the volume provides an intriguing insight into the kinds of work being done by European writers and researchers in this field.

The pieces utilize a mix of secondary and primary sources, and the various essays approach the topic of reform from national, regional, local and biographical perspectives. Some of the essays provide solid, if often overly familiar, overviews of well-known issues while others advance interesting new questions based on focused case studies. However, a general, but perhaps unavoidable, criticism of the volume is that many of the

pieces make ambitious statements that cannot be convincingly proven in the limited space available. Another problematic element present in many of the essays is the interest in proving that the idea of "consensus" in American history is an unfounded myth. It seems surprising that this conclusion, which seems universally accepted among American academics, would be such a prominent feature throughout a volume that covers the struggles to reform and change American society. However, this might point to the different questions being asked by researchers in different parts of the world. Overall, however, this text gives valuable insights into how America is conceived as a subject by historians largely working outside of the United States.

The essays are arranged in chronological order, and begin with three pieces that consider the ongoing conflicts between established religious movements and the increasing presence and popularity of evangelical and enthusiastic religion in America. In the first essay, "Reform, Authority and Conflict in the Churches of the Middle Colonies, 1700-1770," Mark Haberlein argues for a conception of the Great Awakening that places the revivals of the eighteenth century into a much longer time period and follows the revivals through a comparative, multi-denominational and multi-ethnic approach. Haberlein focuses on four colonial churches in the middle colonies—

the Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, German Lutheran and German Reformed. Haberlein's argument centers around the intra- and interdenominational conflicts over the distribution of power between ministers and the laity. Also, Haberlein gives important attention to the powerful effects of migration, settlement patterns and population growth on religious authority, institutions and reform efforts. His argument minimizes the role of the Great Awakening as a single event and sees the revivals as part of a constant re-negotiation of the balance of power within colonial churches. According to Haberlein, the eve of the American Revolution found churches that had experienced simultaneous periods of religious renewal and calls for more ministerial authority.

Louis Billington examines many of the same issues as expressed in the history of New England's "radical Evangelicals" in the early republic. Billington uses this collective term to describe Arminian, anti-institutional, and anti-clerical members of Quaker, Baptist, Methodist and Congregationalist churches. In "The Perfect Law of Liberty: Radical Religion and the Democratization of New England, 1780-1840" Billington asserts that radical Evangelicals emerged in the period surrounding the American Revolution and began to spread throughout the New England countryside despite resistance from the more traditional elements of the Congregationalist Standing Order. Billington traces the socio-economic status of this varied group and follows their eventual entry into the political process. He also takes issue with Charles Sellers' portrayal of this group as "antinomian" in *The Market Revolution* because by the 1840s the Evangelicals had undergone a process of "embourgeoisement" and had become more like their more orthodox counterparts. By 1840, these one-time radicals had settled down to become respectable denominations. Although well-written and interesting, his use of a broad cultural definition makes it hard to know exactly who the Evangelicals were at any given moment. This construction becomes more problematic when they begin to drop the cultural habits that defined their inclusion in the general category of radical Evangelicals.

Keeping the focus on New England, Anthony Mann explores the roots of the Boston Brahmins in "Unitarian Voluntary Societies and the Revision of Elite Authority in Boston, 1780-1820." Like the earlier two essays, Mann wants to look at the struggle between elite elements of Boston culture as they struggled against the growing power of an evangelical lower and middle class. Mann contends that it is crucial to trace the founding of the institutions, organizations and families that would

become central to Brahmin culture to understand how they emerged as a cohesive and powerful group that exercised political, cultural and economic power later in the nineteenth century. To do this, Mann focuses on four Boston cultural and philanthropic associations founded in the 1790s—the Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Humane Society of Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture. He carefully illustrates the membership and goals of each organization, and shows how they attempted to insure a stable social order through the creation of a virtuous elite class.

Two important and deeply analytical nineteenth-century New England reformers, Orestes Brownson and William Lloyd Garrison, merit special treatment of their own in a pair of biographical essays. In "Orestes Brownson and the Relationship between Reform and Democracy," Naomi Wulf uses Orestes Brownson's peripatetic path through the religious and reform movements of the 1820s and 1830s to answer questions about the relationship between reform efforts, individuals and governments. This intellectual biography traces Brownson's increasing impatience with limited and particular reform movements and his acceptance of universalist conceptions of reform. Also, Brownson tried to reconcile politics and reform, going as far as to rally support for the Democratic Party. Wulf's presentation of Brownson's thinking shows him to be a uniquely deep thinker who carefully considered many of the most important movements in the antebellum United States. Louis Kern, one of two scholars in the volume who works in the United States, follows Wulf's essay with another intellectual biography entitled "Sectarian Perfectionism and Universal Reform: The Radical Thought of William Lloyd Garrison." Although it may seem that there is nothing left to be said about the most famous abolitionist in antebellum America, Kern produces a powerful mix of historiography and an reconstruction of Garrison's thoughts about reform. Kern traces the particular theological traditions which Garrison drew on to construct a coherent and consistent view of reform and the possibility of universal regeneration. Kern persuasively shows that all of Garrison's reform efforts were part of a single campaign for the liberation of humankind from bondage. Kern also makes it clear that his steadfast appeals to a higher law and passive nonresistance created a powerful symbol for future generations of reformers.

A subsequent pair of essays explore the sometimes contentious debates over leisure activities in the nineteenth century. Robert Lewis' "Rational Recreation":

Reforming Leisure in Antebellum America“ focuses on the contentious place of recreation in American society. Like the opening essays, Lewis explores the debate between Evangelicals, who largely opposed leisure activities as self-indulgent and ungodly luxuries, and more liberal intellectuals and clergy who saw recreation as a way to use refinement and beauty to improve popular morals. Lewis traces the gradual success of the liberal position, as predominantly elite reformers looked to recreation as a way to heal class divisions, uplift the poor, and control man’s baser instincts. Alexis McCrossen, the other scholar based in an American university, also examines the struggle between evangelicals and liberals in her study of the efforts of Sabbatarians to make Sunday sacred through coercion and persuasion. In one of the best essays in the volume, “Sabbatarianism: The Intersection of Church and State in the Orchestration of Everyday Life in Nineteenth-Century America,” Alexis McCrossen sees Sabbatarianism as both a religious and secular reform, and traces the arguments used to set Sunday aside as a day somehow different from the rest of the week. McCrossen follows the debate from the earliest efforts to prohibit mail delivery using arguments based on the fourth commandment to later pseudoscientific and secular efforts to give a physiological explanation for one day of rest. Despite the lack of legal proscriptions to forbid Sabbath-breaking, McCrossen judges the Sabbatarian effort a success because its advocates managed to persuade the state and the American people to see Sunday as distinct.

In “The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union Reform Movement in the South in the Late Nineteenth Century,” Valeria Gennaro Lerda explores the creation of one of the most important mass woman’s movements in the nineteenth century. She argues that the formation of a non-denominational and broad geographical movement organized around “feminine” reforms like temperance and the defense of the home allowed American women to carve out a position in the public sphere. The piece does not advance a new formulation of the WCTU, but it does make fresh use of the papers of activists like Rebecca Lattimer Felton and Julia Tutwiler. However, this close engagement with the personal papers of the reformers has produced a hagiographic approach towards these leaders. For example, it seems unlikely that Frances Willard, despite her amazing successes, “was able to overcome all the boundaries of southern culture and liberate herself” (p. 172).

The next essay is a fascinating exploration of the evolution of American Quakerism in the twentieth cen-

ture. Howell John Harris, in “War in the Social Order: The Great War and the Liberation of American Quakerism,” contends that at the beginning of the twentieth century the Quakers were a fractured and largely apolitical sect which had drifted from the reforming role they had played in the United States for nearly two hundred years. Harris posits that the Quakers rediscovered their social activism during the First World War. Their pacifism, expressed by individual conscientious objectors and organizations like the American Friends Service Committee, pushed them out of the cultural mainstream towards broader political and social causes. To Harris, their response to the Great War was the start of a period of spiritual rebirth that set the stage for the Quakers role in civil rights later in the decade.

The two essays that follow Harris’ piece take a more overtly trans-Atlantic perspective on American reform movements and find deep connections between the thinking of reformers in the United States and European, especially French, philosophical and political movements. In one of the most interesting and ambitious essays in the collection, Melvyn Stokes draws unexpected but compelling comparisons between the thinking of turn-of-the-century Progressives and modern post-structuralists. Stokes argues that many of the philosophical positions of French writers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault were anticipated by arguments about power and language advanced by writers like John Dewey and Edward A. Ross. He further contends that these elements of Progressive thought are often overlooked because of the narrow understanding of Progressivism advanced by influential historians like Richard Hofstadter. Stokes successfully draws parallels between these thinkers, and shows that these connections should not be so surprising, since “both Progressive writers and French poststructuralists were, in a real sense, members of the same intellectual world”(p.214). Even without the connection to French thinkers, Stokes makes a convincing case that several compelling questions about Progressivism remain unanswered.

In a similar way, Jan C.C. Rupp argues that during the 1940s and 50s American society advanced many, often conflicting, arguments in favor of democracy. Like Stokes, Rupp asserts that these debates drew on European sources, in this case French personalist political programs and French anti-Enlightenment thinking. In “The Cultural Foundations of Democracy: The Struggle between a Religious and a Secular Reform Movement in the American Age of Conformity,” Rupp contends that following World War II there was an extensive debate

about the reforms necessary to the vitality of democracy. He focuses on two groups, a committee of “religious absolutists” called the Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion and an organization of “secular relativists” entitled the Conference on the Scientific Spirit and Democratic Faith. These groups championed different views of the role science and religion played in the foundations of democracy. In this well written article, Rupp brings to light the deep cultural divisions among American thinkers on the same side of the political spectrum.

The concluding essay returns to many of themes touched on by the opening pieces of the collection. Again, the focus is on Evangelicals and their place in the landscape of American religion and reform. Axel R. Schaefer offers a thought-provoking essay entitled “Evangelicalism, Social Reform and the US Welfare State, 1970-1996.” To his credit, Schaefer sees the rise of Evangelical and fundamentalist movements as a complex and varied collection of believers, most of whom do not fit into many popular conceptions of the New Religious Right. Instead, he argues that there are few real connections between religious fundamentalists and economic conservatives and contends that most Evangelicals are actually in favor of the welfare state. He also points to the often unrecognized existence of an Evangelical Left,

and traces this group to the increasing numbers of poor, minority and liberal fundamentalists and the spread of Christianity onto college campuses. He then convincingly details the role these Evangelicals have played in the ongoing debates over the American welfare state.

All of the contributions are clearly organized and presented, with introductions and conclusions that make the substantive arguments of each essay clear. This clarity makes this collection a wonderful volume for students, especially in classes that focus on the general subject of reform in American history. While many of the essays cover territory that will be familiar to experts in the field, they also assume a substantial amount of knowledge about the topography of American religion. Because of this combination, the best audience for the text is graduate students who have a solid background in American history and want to move into the subject of religion and reform in greater depth. However, many of the essays will also be of interest to specialists who want to see how scholars outside of the United States approach some of the crucial issues in the history of reform in America.

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Citation: Stephen Andrews. Review of Adams, David K.; Minnen, Cornelis A. Van, eds., *Religious and Secular Reform in America: Ideas, Beliefs and Social Change*. H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. March, 2000.

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