

Review Symposium on American Religion

“Buyer Beware! Provocative Literature”

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Webster defines “provocative” as “serving or tending to provoke, excite, stimulate, or incense; likely or intended to excite, as passion, to exasperate, or especially, to stir up controversy or discussion; as, *provocative* persons, language, glances, or statements; *provocative* to my curiosity.” That definition gives me sufficient room to assert unequivocally that both of the volumes forming the focus of this symposium are highly provocative. But, as you will discover, I intend the judgment in quite different ways for the two publications.

In the opening pages of *The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*,¹ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark announce their intention to challenge prevailing scholarly assumptions held by many, if not most, historians working in the field of American religious history, a field which in their judgment “suffers from glaring, systematic biases” (4). They set out to explain, not describe (21), the “churching” of America, using economic concepts and models drawn from the marketplace, bolstered by statistics that they, as sociologists, are confident are being correctly interpreted for a first time in their study. Finke and Stark conclude that the remarkable success of organized religion in the United States over the past two centuries is the byproduct of aggressive, otherworldly-oriented sects that took advantage of the religious settlement put in place by the First Amendment of the Constitution. Although there is much of value in their research, the book as whole is disappointing. Their historical

account is highly selective, if not idiosyncratic, and at times unnecessarily contentious. This volume provokes and excites; it exasperates and incenses also. It is filled with statements that appear intentionally provocative.

R. Laurence Moore in *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*² also talks about the marketplace and uses the language of economics in his account of the merchandising of religion and culture over the past two hundred years. But he is concerned with culture, not membership statistics. Moore argues that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries religion in America "took on the shape of a commodity" (6). What emerges in his study is a very sophisticated historical analysis of the mutual interaction of religious and commercial culture in the United States. Moore, with his usual flair for crisp, at times almost playful, at other times harshly honest, prose makes the task of reading this volume a sheer delight. In my opinion, he has now emerged as one of the top two or three American historians writing about the religious history of the United States. His work is wonderfully provocative—exciting, stimulating, and thought-provoking.

It is no coincidence that the language of the marketplace and a concern for economics appear in both of these volumes. The relationship between religious life and economic realities is receiving expanded attention from scholars working in the field of American religious history. A few examples will suffice to illustrate some of the ways this linkage is being explored by historians. Two recent biographers of George Whitefield feature the success that eighteenth-century English revivalist had marketing evangelical religion throughout colonial America by his use of rhetoric and the media.³ Historians focusing on nineteenth-century benevolent societies provide striking evidence of the role that modern business practices played in the expansion of the American Tract Society and the American Bible Society.⁴ The descriptions of twentieth-century religious entrepreneurs, even when unbalanced, alert us to the realities that contemporary independent ministries face as they attempt to raise the large sums of money required to finance media operations.⁵ Similarly, the extensive corporate holdings of some American denominations continue to attract commentary.⁶ In the case of one American sect today, namely, Shakerism, it has been shown that the name is gold and sells almost any product.⁷ In other words, the fact that the authors of these two volumes are turning to the language of the marketplace to understand American religion should come as no surprise. This is a positive historiographical trend, in part, because it has the effect of integrating the study of religious persons, institutions, and ideas into the real world rather than isolating such phenomena, or even worse, providing them sanctuary from critical questions or the careful examination of evidence.

In that respect, no matter how provocative some of their statements may seem, Finke and Stark are to be commended for calling us back to a discussion of the evidence on which we base our larger generalizations. That kind of revisionism is welcome and helpful. For example, close examination of the

limited statistical data on religion from the colonial period is appropriate. Too often historians do simply parrot the guesstimates of others on such matters. Finke and Stark are correct to attack the notion of a golden age of colonial religion, a nostalgic view that distorts the realities. But they are hardly the first to challenge the declension model or to suggest that the secularization thesis is seriously flawed. Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*⁸ is perhaps the most sustained revisionist account of early American religious history in print. Finke and Stark take note of Butler's views when discussing the concept of the "Great Awakening" [86], but they are less forthright in acknowledging that parallels exist between their judgments and Butler's 1990 publication.

The critical center of *The Churching of America* is the discussion of the rising fortunes of what Finke and Stark call the "upstart sects" in the period 1776-1850. In effect, this is the story of the loss of market shares by the denominations that once dominated religious life in the colonial era (Anglicanism, Congregationalism, and Presbyterianism) and the spectacular success of the Baptists and Methodists. According to Finke and Stark, this success was a product of the disestablishment of religion, the simultaneous assertion of the principle of free exercise, and the attendant rise of a free market religious economy. In this new context revivals and camp meetings became the principal means employed by the upstart evangelicals to attract members. The careful manipulation of the setting, the crafting of an appealing message, the skillful use of media, and a down-home preaching style set the leaders of these emergent groups apart from the more educated, wealthier clergy in the denominations that had previously exercised religious hegemony in the British colonies. The "populist" appeal of these newer denominations brought them success in the young republic. That argument, readers will recognize, is a major contribution of *The Democratization of American Christianity* by Nathan O. Hatch.⁹

But Finke and Stark move beyond a description of the gap between the spirit-driven ministers in the upstart sects and the educated clergy. They attempt to place "blame" for the failure of the Anglican, Congregational, and Presbyterian churches on the educated clergy leading these denominations. They suggest, for example, that as "religion became the focus of scholarly critique and attention," its "message" became "more worldly," and it was "held with less certainty" [84]. They link that judgment with the fact that this same period witnessed the establishment of Protestant seminaries in America. Their correlation between an educated clergy that utilized a scholarly perspective and a declining share of the religious population is not persuasive. In effect, these authors have fallen into the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy.

Finke and Stark are also sloppy with their language and loose with their pronouncements. At times their terminology begs for definition. They seem unaware, for example, that there may be more than one kind of "scholarly approach" to religion. Their evident bias for statistical explanations has blinded

them to the usefulness of the large body of historical scholarship that deals fruitfully with religious and theological ideas (which, admittedly, they have little interest in, if not considerable disdain for). Here, for example, is a typical dictum that illustrates their bias: they assert “that theological refinement . . . results in organizational bankruptcy” (5). Finke and Stark might profit from examining the writings of colonial divines who demonstrate that scholarly traditions existed prior to the establishment of nineteenth-century Protestant seminaries. Furthermore, it is possible to argue that theological refinement was also occurring within the upstart sects during their time of rising success. And even our contemporary world provides grounds for dissent from their easy generalization. The growth of fundamentalisms throughout the world does not support the notion that when religion is the object of sustained study it disappears or weakens. Finke and Stark are suffering from too narrow a perspective as they seek to “explain” American religion.

Although economic language has considerable advantage for describing the competitive situation in which the denominations found themselves in the new nation, sometimes Finke and Stark push the metaphors too far. To describe the 1801 Plan of Union between the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians as an “effort to create a religious cartel” (63) has a neat ring to it, but it fails to reckon sufficiently with the variety of motives that prompted the arrangement. In fact, it was a reasonable and logical act of cooperation between closely related branches of the Reformed tradition, no less reasonable and logical than the early cooperation between Methodists and Baptists at frontier camp meetings—a cooperation which Finke and Stark fail to depict in negative terms presumably because it would not fit with their stated assumption that only weak and failing religious groups are interested in cooperation or unification efforts (236).

Finke and Stark apply the theme of upstart sectarian success to the Roman Catholic Church in the United States by describing Irish Catholicism as a “sect movement” (136), that is, a movement in high tension with the society surrounding it. They spend considerable time developing parallels between Protestant revivals and Catholic “missions,” a comparison first made by Jay P. Dolan.¹⁰ In a major revisionist argument, they also suggest that the growth of Catholicism has been exaggerated in pre-Civil War America, arguing rather that its most significant growth took place later. In another chapter they describe the transformation of Methodism in the late nineteenth century and the emergence of Baptist dominance within Protestant ranks. Methodist losses occurred, according to Finke and Stark, when that denomination abandoned its sectarian origins and began to secularize, when it accepted a settled, educated and well-paid clergy, and when it turned away from revivals and camp meetings, giving rise to the Holiness movement in the latter half of the century. They subscribe to the formula that when sectarian tension is reduced by pursuit of education, refinement, and dignity, denominations go to hell in a wheelbarrow (161). This analysis will probably be welcomed by contemporary conservatives who target higher educa-

tion, the creative arts, and the humanities in general as responsible for the ills of society today.

In sum, the legitimate insights in *The Churching of America* are obscured by claims to explain more than is, in fact, explained. The old adage, “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing,” seems appropriate here. Finke and Stark are at times blind to the complexity of the situations they address.

The contrast between *The Churching of America* and *Selling God* could not be greater. No one will ever accuse Moore of over-simplifying. His narrative carries the reader into several virtually uncharted areas of religious and cultural history. This is the best of both social and intellectual history as he weaves his analysis of religion into the larger fabric of American history. This is not conventional religious history; on the contrary, he brings a new set of religious phenomena into sharp focus. Moore’s discussion of the changing patterns of reading in America is a case in point. He shows how traditional Protestant fears of fiction were gradually altered by religious moralists who entered the world of belles-lettres themselves, producing large numbers of moral tales that sold well and were justified as an appropriate way to promote virtue. Moore builds his case, in part, on insights obtained from the expanding scholarly literature that describes the reading habits of Americans. He identifies the cultural warfare over reading as a major step toward the commodification of religion.

An equally engaging analysis of the changing religious response to the theatre and stage performances becomes the vehicle whereby Moore analyzes revivals as religious spectacles and at the same time succeeds in raising a series of fundamental questions about the manner in which standards of taste are established in a democratic society. In much the same way that the theatre in America was initially linked to scandal and a host of social problems, including rowdiness and prostitution, camp meetings and revivals developed a reputation for attracting undesirable social elements. Both institutions had to work to gain respectability—a recurrent cultural pattern that Moore identifies, exploits, explains, and illustrates in several chapters of the book.

Another major theme in *Selling God* is the changing relationship between leisure activities and religion in the United States. Moore charts the remarkable shift from Puritan attitudes toward idleness and recreation implicit in the notion of “redemptive work” to the growing preoccupation of religious Americans with seeking ways to integrate religion and recreation. His narrative incorporates a fascinating range of topics including, for example, P.T. Barnum’s showmanship, the design of Central Park by Frederick Edwin Church, the transformation of Wesleyan Grove on Martha’s Vineyard from a Methodist camp ground to a resort community, the growth of the Chautauqua movement, and the emergence of “Muscular Christianity” institutionalized in such organizations as the YMCA. Moral recreation and physical exertion became happy partners. Moore captures this partnership in one of his many memorable lines: “Jogging really is a Protestant sport” (116).

It is especially appropriate that a volume discussing the marketplace address the issue of class. Moore acknowledges that much of what he describes relates primarily to the middle class. He has a chapter, however, on the relationship between working-class religion and popular mass culture in which, among other topics, he discusses the ways in which bare-knuckle fighting was gradually transformed into more orderly boxing. He also joins an old (and still important) debate concerning the motives driving social reform. He argues against a simple “social control” thesis by showing that a persuasive case can be made for the role of the working class in effecting changes on their own behalf rather than simply being pawns in the hands of middle-class reformers. In other words, the working class also had something to gain from the implementation of reforms. Their leisure culture was not simply foisted on them.

Moore, who describes himself as a “secularist,” situates his understanding of culture somewhere between the definition of high culture associated with Matthew Arnold and the all-encompassing category of culture as employed by cultural anthropologists. That does not lead, however, to a one-sided diatribe against conservative religious values. On the contrary, one of the most instructive chapters in the volume is his discussion of the ways in which progressive reform was also tied closely to the commodification of religion. The Federal Council of Churches as well as individual liberal churchmen became strong advocates for the use of scientific principles of management in the churches, for effective use of advertising, and for perfecting Christian business practices. Moore sees a close link between the activities of liberals at the end of the nineteenth century and the commercial practices of televangelists at the end of the twentieth century.

Perhaps the only portion of the book that is somewhat predictable, given the title *Selling God*, is the last chapter in which Moore brings his argument concerning commodification down to the present and discusses televangelists, the Christian Right, and New Age religion with both insight and a certain tongue-in-cheek quality. This chapter is filled with epigrammatic statements that remind me of Samuel Clemens’s humor. (Maybe it is not coincidence that Mark Twain is cited twice in the volume.) For example, commenting on Norman Vincent Peale’s spiritual mission, Moore writes, “What Willy Loman had needed when he went on the road was Peale’s advice to repeat over and over to himself: ‘I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me’” (241). Speaking of politics in the 1980s, he says, “Politics was a way of holy revenge that separated those who knew why Christ was coming again from those who did not” (250). On the broadcasting successes of conservatives, he opines, “God blessed America for keeping its markets free” (250). His parenthetical description of the *Good News Bible* published in the 1970s is “This Can’t Be the Bible—I Can Understand It” (254). Sometimes Moore uses memorable language to make a more important point. For instance, in a comment about church finances, he writes, “Those who cry ‘hucksterism’ with respect to someone else’s religion are usually no less engaged in selling. They only imagine that their selling is more professional, more tasteful” (264).

In very different ways these two volumes are highly suggestive for the study of American religion. *The Churching of America* demonstrates the importance of paying close attention to statistics at the same time that it indirectly warns of problems attendant on too narrow a focus on numbers. I would suggest that the very notion that religious “winners and losers” can be determined by numerical means is fundamentally flawed. Big is best, and small means failure—that may be the rule of corporations and cartels, but it is a poor measure of the usefulness of religion to individuals, and it ought to provoke vigorous scholarly criticism. By contrast, *Selling God* demonstrates the importance of extending the scope of religion beyond the conventional categories of churches, denominations, beliefs, and rituals. Moore’s volume shows how religion interacts with other dimensions of the human experience, and, in doing so, illustrates its centrality in the study of American culture.

Notes

1. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1992).
2. R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York, 1994).
3. Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, 1991); and Frank Lambert, *Pedlar in Divinity: George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton, 1994).
4. David Paul Nord, “Systematic Benevolence: Religious Publishing and the Marketplace in Early Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Communication and Change in American Religious History*, ed. Leonard I. Sweet (Grand Rapids, 1993), 239-269; and Peter J. Wosh, *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, 1994).
5. See, for example, David Edwin Harrell, *Pat Robertson: A Personal, Religious, and Political Portrait* (San Francisco, 1987); and Gary L. Tidwell, *Anatomy of a Fraud: Inside the Finances of the PTL Ministries* (New York, 1993).
6. See John Heineman and Anson Shupe, *The Mormon Corporate Empire* (Boston, 1985); and Edward R. Kantowicz, *Corporation Sole: Cardinal Munderlein and Chicago Catholicism* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1983).
7. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven, 1992). especially pp. 394-409.
8. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, 1990).
9. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, 1989).
10. Jay P. Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism: The American Experience, 1830-1900* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1978).