

Review of

The Democratization of American Christianity by Nathan O. Hatch and *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* by James Davison Hunter

Book Reviews

NATHAN O. HATCH. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989. xiv; 312 pp. Notes, index. \$15.00.

JAMES DAVISON HUNTER. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. New York: Basic Books, 1991. xiii; 416 pp. Appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$15.00.

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Nathan O. Hatch, Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame, is a leading scholar of religion in American history. In an earlier book, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England*, he explores the mingling of religious and political understandings of freedom in the birth of the American republic. In *The Democratization of American Christianity*, he further revises significantly our understanding of the role of religion in American democracy in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the period often identified as the Second Great Awakening of the evangelical impulse in American Protestantism.

Hatch believes that a prevailing view of "the Second Great Awakening as a conservative force [has] obscured the egalitarianism powerfully at work in the new nation" (5). While distinguished scholars like Perry Miller and Richard Hofstadter have seen the revivalism of this period as a force of order and consensus that repaired a defect in the new democratic society by supplying traditional social control and religious establishment (222-23), Hatch is determined to emphasize the disorderly, antiauthoritarian, and conflictual aspects of religious upheaval in the early republic. In this context, he argues that a democratic or populist transformation of

American Christianity was decisive in shaping the new nation and that such populism continues to mark the distinctive character of religion in America: “Religious populism, reflecting the passions of ordinary people and the charisma of democratic movement-builders, remains among the oldest and deepest impulses in American life” (5).

Focusing less on “the specifics of polity and government” than on “the incarnation of the church into popular culture” (9), Hatch isolates three main aspects of democracy that informed the development of religion in the early republic: first, the rejection of the clergy as a separate and elite order of men; second, the empowerment of ordinary people to reject doctrinal orthodoxy “by taking their deepest spiritual impulses at face value” (10); and finally, the “upsurge of democratic hope” (11) in the dreams of “a new age of religious and social harmony” (10) arising from the overthrow of traditional authority. The author skillfully illustrates the wide influence of the democratic spirit in American religion by focusing on five movements: the Christian movement, the Methodists, the Baptists, the Black churches, and the Mormons. Between two chapters (2 and 7) that provide chronological overviews of the rise and decline of revivalism, Hatch devotes two chapters to the five movements and their leaders. He then offers two chapters treating revivalism from the standpoint of its audiences and of the media (oral, print, and musical) and forms of rhetoric appropriate to such audiences. The eighth and final chapter, an epilogue, briefly traces “The Recurring Populist Impulse in American Christianity” up to the present day.

Throughout the book, Professor Hatch amply and persuasively deploys quotations from primary sources, including pamphlets, booklets, tracts, hymnbooks, journals, and newspapers, to document the pervasive presence of democratic motifs in the revivalist experience. He vividly portrays a populist revolt against traditional religious and social structures. Such a tracing of distinctly populist themes in five distinct religious movements contributes to the reader’s understanding of American Christianity. LDS scholars, in particular, will find here much to consider in developing a more concrete sense of the social and religious context of the Restoration. The Mormon reader will be interested to

learn, for example, that a half century before the First Vision, a certain young Caleb Rich, later to become a leader of the Universalist movement,¹ reported “having a series of visionary experiences in which celestial persons counseled him to avoid all other denominations and all other human advice” (40). LDS readers will similarly prick up their ears to hear Methodist bishop Francis Asbury call in 1814 for a “return to ‘the apostolic order of things,’ which had been lost in the first century ‘when Church governments were adulterated’” (82).

However, Hatch’s treatment of the Mormons as one among many varieties of religious populism is not likely to satisfy readers more familiar with the distinctive character of LDS beliefs. At times the author’s determination to demonstrate “democratization” becomes a procrustean bed which leaves Mormonism appearing somewhat mutilated.

In his most extensive treatment of Mormonism as a case of democratization, a section entitled “The Populist Vision of Joseph Smith” (113–22), Hatch sets an interpretation of the beginnings of Mormonism against the background of the Smith family’s financial difficulties: “In the face of . . . wretched luck, [they] looked in vain for solace from the institutional church” (113). Thus, he sees the rise of Mormonism as a result of class resentments reflected first in Joseph’s “severe skepticism about external institutions” and his turning “inward, toward a firmer reliance on religious dreams and visions that were typical of the Smith family” as well as on “various forms of folk magic and occult sciences” (114). Hatch then offers a reading of the Book of Mormon itself as “a document of profound social protest, an impassioned manifesto by a hostile outsider against the smug complacency of those in power and the reality of social distinctions based on wealth, class, and education” (116).

Certainly, the Book of Mormon has no shortage of passages condemning the pride of prosperity, and so perhaps it is not altogether implausible for Hatch to claim that “the single most striking theme in the Book of Mormon is that it is the rich, the proud, and the learned who find themselves in the hands of an angry God” (117). Still, even setting aside Hatch’s rather smug assumption that Joseph Smith was involved in “*constructing* a grand and complex narrative,” or that he “chose to quote extensively from Old Testament prophets” (116; italics added), Hatch’s argument strains to

the breaking point when he asserts that “Smith’s overall vision” with its “distinct class bias. . . . convey[ed] the unmistakable claim that common people had the right to shape their own faith and to take charge of their own religious destiny” (121).

In this evocation of the people’s “right . . . to take charge of their own religious destiny,” we see clearly the author’s enthusiasm for democratization, an enthusiasm that undergirds his whole presentation of Christianity in the early republic. Hatch sometimes evinces an awareness of the risks involved in populism (the new authority of rootless popular “leaders,” the temptations of democratic conformism; see, for example, pages 16, 183, 186, 208, 219), but his dominant tendency is sympathy for the democratization he documents. He rather serenely accepts the “exaltation of public opinion as a primary religious authority” (81) or “as an arbiter of truth” (162). Hatch’s differences with influential interpreters of the Second Great Awakening such as Perry Miller and Richard Hofstadter finally turn on his greater readiness to share the populist enthusiasms of his subjects: Where other historians are concerned about the erosion of institutional and intellectual structures, Hatch cheers the populist assault on authority. Where people like Miller and Hofstadter (and Tocqueville) see the Federalists’ high-minded reasonableness giving way to a populist enthusiasm contained only by a reinforced democratic morality, Hatch prefers class analysis to intellectual scrutiny and thereby accepts at face value the “eclectic character of popular faiths” or the “blurring” of democratic and Christian worldviews (36; see also 81, 135, 122–23, 254–55 n.79).

The trouble with this “eclecticism,” or what Hatch himself once described as a “graft[ing]” onto evangelical enthusiasm of potentially “alien” democratic values (255), is that the cultural force of populism may in the end overwhelm all sense of transcendent authority—the democratization of American Christianity may end in democratization, pure and simple. Hatch seems to recognize this danger when he observes that “men . . . committed to the separation of church and state used political structures as a church model. . . . [A] government so enlightened as to tell the churches to go their own way must also have prophetic power to tell them which way to go” (186).

But Hatch seems to overlook a connection between this democratic politicization of Christianity in the early republic and

the “polarization” (219) of contemporary American culture briefly discussed in the epilogue. Here Hatch argues that, under pressure from a “new class of professionals whose cultural authority is rising” (218), religious people today “are pressured to make accommodations to the secular definition of values at the core of the university” (219). But he again seems not to notice that this new class of intellectuals, in their distrust of the authority of religious traditions, would appear to be taking seriously the very principle of Hatch’s “democratization”: the idea that human opinion is the final “arbiter of truth” (162). If believers feel compelled to defer in the public arena to the dominant secularism among contemporary intellectuals, it may be because they have already accepted the intellectuals’ distinctly modern premise, the “right to think for oneself” (162), understood as the denial of any truth superior to human opinion.

The contemporary conflict over the very meaning of truth is central to James Davison Hunter’s *Culture Wars*. The author, professor of Sociology and Religious Studies at the University of Virginia, argues persuasively that “America is in the midst of a culture war that has had and will continue to have reverberations not only within public policy but within the lives of ordinary Americans everywhere. . . . *At stake is how we as Americans will order our lives together*” (34; italics in original).

Hunter introduces his argument with a prologue consisting of three “dispatches,” or case studies, that vividly represent both sides of a deep cultural conflict as it erupts on the contemporary political scene: the issue of gay rights and the proposed domestic partnership law in San Francisco, the protests surrounding an abortion clinic in New York City, and a controversy in Tennessee concerning the moral content of public school texts. These cases nicely illustrate central features of the struggle that Hunter explores in the remainder of the book: in each example, both sides see themselves as acting in the name of high moral principles, and each side believes its principles to be fundamental to the meaning of America. Thus, a conservative activist named Chuck, vigorously opposing the San Francisco domestic partnership law, believes he is defending the Christian moorings of the Declaration of Independence; his rival, Richmond, just as strenuously affirms the cause

of gay rights as the fulfillment of the Declaration's teaching that "all men are created equal."

These and many other political and cultural conflicts described by Hunter reveal not simply different viewpoints on particular moral and political questions, but a fundamental difference concerning the very meaning of moral truth. The basic issue that threatens to divide Americans into two hostile camps speaking alien moral languages is this: Is morality ultimately grounded in "an external, definable, and transcendent authority" (the point of view Hunter labels "orthodox")? Or is moral truth "a process, . . . a reality that is ever unfolding" (the assumption of "progressives") (44)? And this question threatens not only the basic moral consensus underlying American politics, but also describes a fault line within American religion. This intrafaith rupture first made itself felt as early as a century ago and now threatens to open into an abyss separating more orthodox from more progressive believers of every faith. Hunter thus documents a trend toward political alliances that bring together more "orthodox" or conservative Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in opposition to more "progressive" members of these same faiths.

Hunter's exploration of the structural forces driving the culture wars recalls Hatch's concluding observations on the growing prestige of what he calls "secular" values in contemporary society. "Public discourse," Hunter observes, "is largely a discourse of elites," and the rise of an "information-oriented" social system in recent decades has produced "a huge expansion in the number of people who derive their livelihoods from the economics of knowledge, information, ideas, and the like" (59, 62–63). This development seems to give a cultural advantage to the "progressives," "who tend to draw popular support from among the highly educated, professionally committed, *upper* middle classes" (63; italics in original). Thus, the association between populism and progressivism that seems, in Hatch's account, to have characterized American Christianity in the early nineteenth century has broken down: the elites now march under the banner of truth as progressive liberation from every restraint of tradition and orthodoxy, while the less educated are left in the role of reactionaries who cling to scraps of belief in some truth transcending the "right to think for oneself" (Hatch 162).

What will be the outcome of this struggle over the moral basis of law and politics in America? Hunter considers this question in his final chapters (“Part V: Toward Resolution”). Surveying the relative advantages of each side in the conflict, he finds formidable momentum and intensity in an ongoing “conservative cultural revolution” but finally appears to judge these strengths less decisive than the hold of “progressives” on the “knowledge industry itself—the ‘reality-defining mechanisms’ of contemporary American society” (300). The access of progressive intellectuals to the most powerful means of defining the terms of public debate (research and education, media, and government) means that more conservative forces run a constant risk of being co-opted by the often subtle but steady currents of progressivism. “There is the distinct possibility,” Hunter writes, “that orthodox communities may become so assimilated to a progressive political (and linguistic) culture that they will not be capable of offering any effective opposition to the world view that currently plagues them” (306).

How do Latter-day Saints stand in relation to the culture wars described by Hunter? The author’s only sustained discussion of LDS issues is an interesting reflection on the limits of pluralism as reflected in Supreme Court decisions in polygamy cases (208–9); beyond this, he includes only scattered and brief references to Mormon participation in the culture wars. These few examples leave the impression that Mormons are as much threatened by division on the orthodox/progressive aspects as other faiths—a question that thoughtful Latter-day Saints should consider. Certainly recent troubles surrounding the discipline of some Mormon intellectuals should remind us that we are not immune from the tensions we see in other faiths between those whose understanding of truth is shaped by elite culture and those who retain a more traditional understanding. Thus, some dissenters from mainstream Mormonism deplore the “forms and observances, catechisms and orthodoxies” which in their view characterize the official Church—while proclaiming instead “the exuberant expansiveness of Mormon theology,” a form of belief which allegedly promises a “liberation from all limitations.”² Hunter would clearly recognize such rhetoric as “progressive,” but it will also ring familiar for those knowledgeable about the style of argument used in some Mormon circles.³

For Latter-day Saints, the practical question of a proper stance towards the culture wars remains. Lofty indifference to political strife is attractive to those who value equanimity and moderation, but Hunter makes a convincing case that no one can afford to claim neutrality in a conflict which concerns the basic terms of our common life as Americans. Not only as individuals and families, but as a religious community, we have a large stake in how the meaning of moral truth is settled in areas such as abortion, education, sexuality, and the nature of the family. Moreover, as Hunter points out, a posture of “quiescence” tends toward “an acceptance of the privatization of faith,” a position that may at the extreme be indistinguishable from the essentially progressive belief in “radical subjectivism” (321).

It seems inevitable, then, that Latter-day Saints who believe in moral truth above individual preferences or intellectual fashion will be drawn into alliances on moral-political issues with others in the “orthodox” camp—even with many whose particular orthodoxy (such as biblical fundamentalism) may be a continuing ground of considerable mutual suspicion. The challenge in these alliances for thoughtful Mormon citizens will be to develop a certain political and intellectual sophistication capable of appreciating common purposes without losing sight of insuperable differences, of holding firm to the teachings and commitments of the restored gospel while cultivating a greater sensitivity to both differences and commonalities with other groups seeking what is virtuous, lovely, of good report, and praiseworthy (A of F 13). Faithful, intellectually alert, and responsible Latter-day Saints will have to know how to make and sustain political and cultural friendships without compromising their distinctive religious commitments.

There is certainly food for thought here for all Latter-day Saints: a warning both to those involved in the “knowledge industry” and therefore continually exposed directly to its culturally “progressive” undertow and to those who stand apart from all intellectuality and believe they can escape the influence of progressive assumptions without carefully examining such assumptions in relation to their own moral and political vocabulary.

In any case, Hunter himself seems to conclude with a wish for a victory of neither party but for a kind of standoff or “peaceful

coexistence" (297) in which "agreement around a renewed public philosophy could establish a context of public discourse . . . to sustain a genuine and peaceable pluralism" (307). However, given his own description of the abyss separating the "progressive" from the "orthodox" frame of mind, the author's concluding call for "rational deliberation, . . . genuine debate" (320), and a "recognition of the 'sacred' within different moral communities" (322) rings rather hollow and raises further questions. Isn't the problem precisely that the two sides in the culture wars have unreconciled, maybe irreconcilable, understandings of the meaning of "sacred"? Rather than attempting to stand above and apart from the fundamental issues that divide progressive and orthodox parties in contemporary America, a higher partisanship might begin by constructively engaging the ultimately unavoidable questions raised by the "progressive" challenge to the traditional understanding of transcendent truth: How can we be faithful to truth conceived as transcendent and eternal while recognizing the imperfection of our present understanding, framed and conditioned as it is by the vocabularies and paradigms of our day? How can an openness to that elusive range of goods we indicate by the term "sacred" actually be sustained within a framework which views truth only as "a process" and thus "tends to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life" (44-45)?

NOTES

¹Universalists teach that every member of the human race will be saved.

²Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The September Six," in *Religion, Feminism, and Freedom of Conscience: A Mormon/Humanist Dialogue*, ed. George D. Smith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 7.

³See my "What Is a 'Mormon Intellectual,'" *This People* 15 (fall 1994): 20-34.