

Class and Culture in Recent Anglo-American Religious Historiography

A Review Essay

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[See table of contents](#)

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REVIEW ESSAY/NOTE CRITIQUE

Class and Culture in Recent Anglo-American Religious Historiography: A Review Essay

Bruce Tucker

Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang 1978).

Marion L. Bell, *Crusade in the City: Revivalism in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press 1977).

Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press 1978).

Thomas W. Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture, 1780-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1976).

William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1978).

Sandra S. Sizer, *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion: The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Revivalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1978).

Anthony F.C. Wallace, *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1978).

Robert M. Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: the Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press 1979).

J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1979).

DURING THE past 15 years, historians of the working class have developed a renewed appreciation for religious history. In 1966, Herbert Gutman argued that religious beliefs and values had provided labour activists in nineteenth-century America with an ideology and language which enabled them to criticize the intrusion of the industrial order into their lives. Conventional historical wisdom previously held that evangelical Protestantism had encouraged middle class values of thrift, industry, and sobriety among workers and had helped to modernize preindustrial work habits. Gutman found, however, that Protestant ideology and religious perfectionism had also nourished the resistance of workers in struggles against the captains of industry. And in 1972, David Montgomery

explained the absence of a unified working-class consciousness in Philadelphia after six years of concerted militance between 1837 and 1843 with reference to religious conflict. The weavers, who were predominantly Irish Roman Catholics, split with their Protestant comrades over the issues of liquor licensing, religious education in the schools, and Sabbath-closing. "By their very nature," Montgomery concluded, "evangelical demands fragmented the working class in antebellum Philadelphia and thereby created for historians the illusion of a society lacking in class conflict."¹ Although Gutman argues that religious ideology contributed to working-class solidarity, and Montgomery shows that religious strife fragmented the trade-union movement, both scholars established the critical importance of religion in labour history.

Influenced by this work, younger historians have now begun to study religious movements within the context of class struggle. They have also shifted the focus of religious history from prominent leaders, institutions, and theology to the social and cultural meaning of religious experience.

Gutman's work on evangelical Protestantism in the Gilded Age indicated that religious commitments have often exacerbated fundamental conflicts in the American past. In a study of social conflict in pre-revolutionary Virginia, for example, Rhys Isaac found that the lower orders rallied behind Baptist evangelical leaders to form a culture of opposition to the Anglican gentry.² Thus historians are now

suggesting that religion has provided men and women with a resource which has charged their struggles with a particular vehemence. The power of religious ideology, moreover, did not abate with the emergence of a seemingly secularized industrial society. Other historians, however, have argued that religion is best understood as an arena in which potential conflicts have been symbolically resolved or avoided. Common religious values, it is argued, have transcended differences of class, ethnicity, or gender.³

One method of testing these hypotheses is to examine the relationship between religious commitment and political consciousness in the early nineteenth century when modern class structures were in the process of formation. Paul Johnson's *A Shopkeeper's Millennium* explores the fragmentation of preindustrial communal relations and the emergence of a modern social order in Rochester, New York in the 1820s and 1830s against the background of religious revivalism. When evangelist Charles Grandison Finney descended upon Rochester in 1830, Johnson argues, he encountered a town in which traditional social arrangements had disintegrated, leaving a group of merchants and master craftsmen who had lost their capacity to maintain order. Crippled by the politics of Antimasonry, and perplexed by the presence of a working class which seemed to ignore their example, these leaders now faced a proletariat which was gaining a new sense of its identity and power. Ironically, Johnson suggests, Finney's revival brought harmony to factions within the elite and divided the working class into Christian and non-Christian camps. "To put it simply," he writes, "the middle class became resolutely bourgeois between

¹ Herbert S. Gutman, "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: the Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age," in *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York 1976), 79-117; David Montgomery, "The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington Riots of 1844," *Journal of Social History*, 5 (1972), 439.

² Rhys Isaac, "Preachers and Patriots: Popular Culture and the Revolution in Virginia," Alfred

F. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Illinois 1976), 125-56.

³ Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York 1975).

1825 and 1835. And at every step, that transformation bore the stamp of evangelical Protestantism." (8)

Johnson has identified the participants in the revival from church records, tax lists, city directories, and census schedules. Assuming that religious ferment usually occurs within the context of specific social relations, he explores the transformation of family life, the reorganization of work, neighbourhoods, and political structures. The crisis of authority in Rochester originated in the reorganization of production in small manufacturing enterprises. With the expansion of markets, proprietors began to rationalize production, and small shops with traditionally close relationships between employer and employee began to decline. In the shoe trade, for example, employees now made only the uppers in the shops, while journeymen shaped the parts in boarding houses and women sewed the final product together in their homes. Family-centered work relations gave way to wage labour as workers left living situations with their employers to live in boarding houses. The separation of home from work and the formation of class-specific neighbourhoods loosened the traditional control of employers over both the workplace and the social life of employees.

As workers began to live together and to form their own customs of recreation, community leaders became concerned about a perceived decline in the level of morality. Although temperance was not an issue in 1825, by 1828 middle class leaders were imagining themselves under siege by a "drink-crazed proletariat." Informal ties between master and worker, such as the sociability of drink in the master's home, were disappearing. Working people began to create their own social life, and drink and drunkenness became a part of the web of separation. "An ancient bond between classes had become, within a very short time," according to Johnson, "an angry badge of working-class status." (60)

Temperance reformers then countered by trying to convince employers to abstain

as an example to their employees. Reformers promised that temperance would result in a disciplined, orderly, and more efficient work force. When employers began to prohibit drinking in the work place, workers began to drink with one another, an act which stood in sharp defiance to middle class owners and reformers. "It taught the masters a disheartening lesson: if authority collapsed whenever they turned their backs, then there was in fact no authority." (82-3)

The transformation of social relations, however, was complicated by a rupture within the middle class itself. Divided by the politics of Antimasonry and the struggle to control both patronage and a seemingly unruly proletariat, middle class rulers found themselves impotent. And it was into this "impasse" that Charles Grandison Finney came in 1830-31. He left behind him a united bourgeoisie and a fragmented working class.

The origins of this development lay in the progress of the revival itself. Johnson identifies the converts, explains their common experiences, and accounts for the non-participants. The revival, he asserts, drew new converts disproportionately from the ranks of business, professionals, and master craftsmen. The sharp rise in conversions from the latter group, moreover, differentiated this revival from previous ones. Master builders and shoemakers contributed 70 per cent and 73 per cent more converts, respectively, to the churches in 1834 than in 1827. Concluding his examination of family structure and the occupations of converts, Johnson argues that "Finney's converts were entrepreneurs who had made more than their share of the choices that created a free labor economy and a class-bounded society in Rochester." (107)

If the revival helped to unify the bourgeoisie, however, it also produced a deep split in the working class. In 1830-31, 22 per cent of male converts had been journeymen, but between 1834 and 1837 that figure climbed to 42 per cent. Johnson

explains this increase by suggesting that wage earners worked mostly for employers who insisted on seeing them in church. Employers rewarded the thrift, industry, and dependability of church-going workers, while they quashed the aspirations of the unregenerate. "By the mid-1830s," Johnson argues, "there were two working classes in Rochester: a church-going minority tied closely to the sources of steady work and advancement, and a floating majority that faced insecure employment and stifled opportunities." (127) Although the unchurched, floating proletariat does not seem to have been restricted to certain trades, it was denied access to opportunity, training and capital.

This book is the first major local study which analyzes the relationship between religious revivalism and class formation in industrial society. And it is largely the story of the emergence of a hegemonic class with the ability to control the mobility of those beneath them through religious culture. *A Shopkeeper's Millennium* does not, however, link the specific experience of religious conversion with the choices made by the participants. This is a knotty problem, for people do not always believe what is convenient, nor do they always adhere to the religious choices that historians think ought to have attended their oppression. Johnson exaggerates, moreover, the use of church attendance and membership as a measure of religious piety. We need to know more about working-class culture in nineteenth-century Rochester, particularly about the non-ecclesiastical forms of enforcing communal standards of morality.⁴ The involvement of women, both in the work force and in religious organizations also needs further elaboration. Finally, did the split in the proletariat and the relative homogeneity of the bourgeoisie persist over time? The tran-

sition from the turmoil of the 1820s to the equilibrium of the 1830s occurred quickly, and the reader is left to ponder the fate of the newly-formed consciousness of Rochester's workers. Nonetheless, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium* is an excellent model for future study of working-class religion.

Johnson's emphasis on the efforts of working people to develop their own community and culture is one of the major strengths of his study. Some recent students of revivalism, however, have not been as sensitive to the class specificity of religious ideology. While they have tried, as Johnson does, to link religious experience with general economic conditions, they have not considered the historical agency of those who were swept along by the momentum of revivals. Marion Bell's *Crusade in the City: Revivalism in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia*, traces the progress of evangelical religion during a period of urbanization and industrialization. The sense of commitment and communalism generated in revivals, Bell argues, helped to mitigate the depersonalization of social relations which attended the growth of the city. Secondly, she suggests that revivalists and businessmen joined hands during the revival of 1858 to promote values of thrift, diligence, and discipline. Bell conveys no sense of how working people responded to this advice.

Organized around the biographies of prominent revivalists such as Charles Grandison Finney and Dwight Moody, this book adds little to our understanding of urban revivalism. Bell's suggestion that women found in the revivals an outlet for their little understood sexual urges hardly explains the enormous participation of females in the evangelical movement. According to Bell, revivals confirmed domestic women in their passivity and did not alter their consciousness. Nineteenth-century activists in the abolition, feminist, socialist, and temperance movements often experienced their first collective work in religious groups. Ignoring this evi-

⁴ See for example, Bryan Palmer, "Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century America," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978), 5-62.

dence, Bell never explains why some groups fully embraced the business ideology of the evangelists, while others turned it to their advantage in struggles against slavery, poverty, drunkenness, and sexual oppression.

Similarly, Richard Carwardine, in *Transatlantic Revivalism*, tried to explain the appeal of the evangelists in England and America from 1790 to 1865 by referring to general social and economic conditions. Carwardine finds some statistical correlation between the incidence of revivalism and social calamities such as epidemics, war, and depression, but he argues that these factors alone cannot explain the momentum of religious fervour once it had been unleashed. The revival in Britain in 1858, for example, continued to flourish long after the economic downturn of 1857-58 had ended. The inherent dynamism of evangelical movements and the catalyst of industrialization, Carwardine argues, determined the trajectory of religious fervour in nineteenth-century England and America. Like Bell, however, Carwardine does not explain how audiences assimilated the messages of evangelical preachers, nor does he account for the enormously different uses of evangelical traditions by people of different classes.

Neither Bell nor Carwardine seriously entertain the possibility that working people reinterpreted the messages transmitted to them in rituals, sermons, tracts, and hymns. Historians of the working class have at least been sensitive to the fact that their subjects have not always absorbed uncritically the values of resignation, patience and submission to divine authority offered by middle class preachers. Indeed, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, E.P. Thompson argued that working people overcame the psychic indoctrination of Wesleyan Methodism, and the overtly political and counter-revolutionary content of Sunday School curricula to build an effective opposition to the moral hegemony of the middle and aris-

tocratic classes. This interpretation must now be somewhat qualified by Thomas Laqueur's *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture, 1780-1850*, a study originally undertaken to confirm Thompson's thesis. Laqueur found that in their encounter with middle class institutions, working-class activists drew on their Sunday School training in the organization of trade unions and political agitation.

In the late eighteenth century, Sunday Schools were interdenominational, town-wide institutions, modeled after alm-houses and intended for the benefit of the poor. Interdenominational cooperation disintegrated over policy concerning expansion, however, and Sunday Schools gradually became neighbourhood institutions under the control of local leaders. In working-class neighbourhoods, Sunday Schools became autonomous from both church and chapel and served the needs of working-class children. Laqueur has calculated that in 1850, two million working-class children attended Sunday School for an average of three to five hours a week, over a period of about four years. Since working-class children did not attend weekday school in large numbers, the Sunday School was their main source of training in literacy and morality.

Sunday School instruction, Laqueur argues, armed future trade-union activists with literacy and organizational skills, and it provided a means for working people to identify themselves apart from the counter-revolutionary thrust of Methodism. In the agitation for the Factory Act of 1833, for example, Sunday School leaders gathered signatures through their national networks. Thompson's argument that the Sunday School movement attempted to impose self-discipline and punctuality on preindustrial work habits remains convincing, but Laqueur has opened the possibility that working people used Sunday Schools as centres of resistance to the intrusion of bourgeois religious culture. He has successfully taken

Thompson's advice to study the historical agency of working people as they lived their history and fashioned their own consciousness.

Religion and Respectability is an exercise in the sociological study of religious history, focussing on institutions and associational networks. Other historians interested in the significance of communal solidarity based on religious ideology have turned to cultural anthropology for methodological assistance. Through the study of ritual, bodily gestures, and games, anthropologists have emphasized the importance of culture as an arena in which individuals understand and manipulate the realities of their public world. Three new books reflect this growing preoccupation with the methods of anthropology. William G. McLoughlin's *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, attempts to interpret American history as a millenarian movement which has provided and periodically redefined the central values of American culture. In *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion*, Sandra Sizer analyzes the social significance of hymn-singing with the help of theories borrowed from Clifford Geertz, Emile Durkheim, and Claude Levi-Strauss. And in *Rockdale: the Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution*, anthropologist Anthony F.C. Wallace follows the changes in social relations, the organization of work, and religious ideology in a small cotton manufacturing district in Pennsylvania.

Drawing on Wallace's earlier work on revitalization movements, McLoughlin suggests that there have been five great cultural crises in the American past, and that in each case core American myths and values have been rejuvenated. "At the heart of our culture," he writes, "are the beliefs that Americans are a chosen people; that they have a manifest (or latent) destiny to lead the world to the millenium; that their democratic-republican institutions, their bountiful natural resources, and their concept of the free and morally responsible individual operate under a body of higher

moral laws...; and that the Judaeo-Christian personal and social ethic... causes the general welfare to thrive by allowing the greatest possible free play and equal opportunity to each individual to fulfill his or her potential." (xiv)

Formulated during the first crisis, the Puritan Awakening in England, 1610-40, this belief system sustained the building of American communities in the seventeenth century. During the early eighteenth century, however, that cohesive moral order collapsed under the weight of new economic and political priorities. In the revivalist movement of 1730-60, Americans began to redefine their beliefs to accommodate the democratization of provincial society. Similar redefinitions, McLoughlin argues, took place during the Second Great Awakening, 1800-30 and during the Third Great Awakening, 1890-1920. Americans are now in the midst of a Fourth Awakening which began in the 1960s and will persist until a new generation overcomes the contradictions of post-World War II liberalism. According to this interpretation, a "civil religion" has ultimately always transcended differences of class, ethnicity, and gender through cycles of crisis and reform. Reforms generate new inequalities, conflict, and eventually another crisis. Fundamental social conflicts are always symbolically resolved by the reorientation of a religious awakening.

But the language of reform and regeneration only has a meaning as it is used to address specific contexts of time and place. Gutman showed that both capitalist owners and working-class leaders in the Gilded Age used Protestant ideology to justify and disseminate their views in a struggle for power over the rewards of work. If the cultural core has a meaning in American history, it is perhaps as a resource which has been used differently by groups with diverse purposes in struggles for power and advantage in particular situations. Neither the young nor the defenders of the liberal tradition can claim

consistent victories in the past. McLoughlin stresses the symbolic resolution of these conflicts and minimizes the persistent social divisions which have pitted class against class, men against women, and race against race.

Both Sandra Sizer and Anthony F.C. Wallace explain the resolution of conflict similarly. Sizer sees hymns as rhetorical devices, or as exercises in persuasion, and she proposes to demonstrate how they "articulate a structure of the world and simultaneously create a community with its own specific identity." (18-19) Through hymns, Americans asserted their sense of the kind of world in which problems of the emerging industrial order did not exist. "The ideal," she writes, "was a free society of working people, each pursuing his own interests and enterprises without encroaching on others; all would be morally pure individuals not given to extremes." (147) Downturns in the economy, or the Civil War might disrupt this harmony, but such events only served as catalysts to create new rhetorical strategies which would right the balance between good and evil.

Sizer does not ask, however, how hymn-singing contributed to the transformation of political consciousness. How did the audience respond to the passive role which hymn singer Ira Sankey assigned to them? Her comment that evangelical Christians saw the family as a refuge from the rough, immoral order of the industrial world ignores the fact that for many the family was a source of support and resistance in industrial conflicts. The lyrics of nineteenth-century hymns were meaningful to the singers only when they used them to understand conflicts in the home, neighbourhood, and workplace. Without more attention to the context of time and place, it is doubtful that this line of analysis can succeed in explaining the social meaning of hymn-singing.

Anthony F.C. Wallace succeeds better than Sizer in linking the range of possible meanings of Protestant evangelical ideol-

ogy to the lives of the people of Rockdale. In elaborate detail, he describes the emergence of the factory system, family economy, and the ultimate struggle for control over production, wages, and culture itself. Although Rockdale's workers showed signs of political consciousness, Wallace argues, their sense of class solidarity was undermined by evangelical religion, and by nationalism generated in the crusade against slavery. Thus Protestant evangelical religion, fostered and paid for by the mill owners, provided a symbolic and quiescent resolution to potential class conflict in Rockdale.

Rockdale contains much new material on the development of textile mill technology, the work process, and the organization of authority within the mills. In addition, Wallace explores the family relationships and networks among both workers and owners, and fluctuations in the cost of living and the disposition of income. Working families relied on the productive capacities of almost all members for subsistence, while for the owners family alliances were necessary for launching new enterprises.

At times, however, the plot in this narrative is somewhat forced. Wallace incorrectly pits deists and freethinkers against evangelical Christians in the struggle for cultural hegemony. Deism was the counter-religion of Enlightenment thinkers which asserted that reason and science alone could supply the basis of religion and morality. In America it was associated with the anticlericalism and radical republican ideology of Thomas Paine, whose *Age of Reason* (1794), ridiculed the pretensions and moral authority of institutional Christianity. In the 1790s Americans rejected deism because they associated it with atrocities committed by French revolutionaries. By the 1830s and 1840s deists and freethinkers did not have the credibility and prominence that Wallace ascribes to them. This is a crucial mistake because Wallace implies that a radical critique of Protestant hegemony ought to

have emanated from deism. Since deists did not provide an alternative ideology, he assumes, mill owners were free to impose evangelical religion on the workers of Rockdale.

Two interpretive flaws weaken Wallace's attempt to understand the nature of class conflict in this setting. By asking why workers failed to develop a consistently proletarian consciousness, Wallace excuses himself from determining the particular qualities of working-class culture which enabled workers to differentiate themselves from owners. Community resistance to arbitrary wage cuts erupted in 1836 and 1842, and workers absented themselves from Sunday School and church. Committees were formed to force a systematic shutdown of the mills. If these actions failed to alter the structures of power in Rockdale, they nonetheless offer evidence of a sense of proletarian community which was not quashed by evangelical religion. Workers may have been victimized by the consolidation of power by mill owners, but at the same time, they too were creators of a way of life, and of a culture which did not always correspond to the owners' imperatives. As Laqueur demonstrated in the case of the English Sunday School movement, workers have used middle class religious values in the formation of indigenous religious traditions.

Secondly, Wallace does not distinguish carefully between the close personal world of community in Rockdale and the larger, more impersonal arena of national politics and evangelical religion. Rockdale was not simply a mirror which reflected images of national political contests, yet Wallace imposes a harmony between national and local issues which did not exist in the minds of his subjects. As Americans approached the possibility of Civil War, they were not thereby blinded to their own interests in local communities. As the Civil War approaches in the narrative of *Rockdale*, class differences which Wallace draws at the beginning seem to dissipate. Antebellum society, described through the

eyes of the owners, is unified and ready to strike against the infidel Slave Power. Had Wallace presented a corresponding view through the eyes of Rockdale's workers, he would likely have found that the traditions of resistance were not so easily abandoned.

Wallace's work, like most of the recent writing in Anglo-American religious history, concentrates on mainstream Protestant evangelicalism. Although the study of smaller sectarian groups has been relatively neglected, some promising studies are beginning to emerge. In *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), Christopher Hill examined the English Revolution from the perspective of radical sectarians such as the Quakers, Levellers, Ranters, and Fifth Monarchists. For 20 years, Hill argued, these groups openly countered the hegemony of property rights and the Protestant ethic which triumphed by the time of the Restoration in 1660. Following Hill's example, J.F.C. Harrison has written a history of popular millenarianism in England from 1780 to 1850. And in a study of American Pentecostalism from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, Robert M. Anderson has linked Pentecostal beliefs to the social fortunes of the deprived class which formed the membership. While Harrison argues that millenarianism constituted a dissident cultural movement, Anderson suggests that the Pentecostals displaced their potential political radicalism into aggression against the major Protestant denominations.

In *Vision of the Disinherited*, Anderson defines Pentecostals by their insistence on speaking in tongues "as a sign of Baptism in the Spirit for the individual, a sign of a Second Pentecost for the Church, and a sign of the imminent Second Coming of Christ." (4) His profile of the leadership reveals that the movement drew on young, rural men with average or below average education. Many had changed religious affiliations often in the past, and most had experienced severe personal tragedies such as a broken family or the loss of a parent.

Suffering from acute personal insecurities, these people could find no comfort or respectability in the mainstream denominations. The leadership, moreover, accurately represented the Pentecostal membership. Consisting largely of immigrants, urban blacks, and poor Southern whites, the followers were particularly vulnerable to speaking in tongues because the denial of their social aspirations often hinged on problems of language. Speaking in tongues, Anderson argues, lifted these men and women out of their tragic social and emotional circumstances into an ecstatic world where oppression was transcended. The convert found in Pentecostalism, he suggests, "the marginal religion that expressed and dignified his marginality, but also contained some potential for assimilation into the core culture." (136)

The political positions adopted by this group, moreover, seem to have reflected a drive to overcome its marginality and to identify with the aims of those who held power over them. They tried to build a theocratic and autocratic religious organization, preached total submission to the state, and advocated restriction of First Amendment freedoms. In addition, they opposed unionization, and in the South they sided with cotton-mill owners in the strikes of the 1930s. "Pentecostalism was an instrument forged by a segment of the working class out of protest against a social system that victimized them," Anderson concludes, "but it functioned in a way that perpetuated that very system. A potential challenge to the social system was transformed into a bulwark of it." (222)

This book offers the most compelling historical analysis of the Pentecostal movement to date, but it does not explain the connection between the particular experience of speaking in tongues and the political consciousness of Pentecostals themselves. Anderson has described the social characteristics of the group and reflected on the absence of a radical consciousness that he thinks they ought to have possessed. Religious belief in the

twentieth century, however, does not necessarily provide an umbrella of consciousness which shapes the entire range of the believer's behaviour. There are often jarring disjunctures between the demands of family, neighbourhood, and workplace, and the demands of religious affiliation. On the politics of labour organization, for example, Pentecostals may have had more in common with their work mates than their fellow worshippers. *Vision of the Disinherited* does not show how Pentecostals within the particular contexts of family, work, and community used their religious ideology to survive trying social circumstances. Instead it argues that Pentecostals misplaced aggression against the sources of their oppression and suggests that speaking in tongues was a means of reconciling themselves with suffering and misfortune in this world.

J.F.C. Harrison's *The Second Coming* provides an important corrective to Anderson's notion that religious ecstasy inhibits political consciousness. Working with meagre sources and against customary scholarly skepticism, Harrison's task is to give the millenarians a sympathetic hearing. "It is puzzling," he admits, "when we find intelligent people expressing beliefs which we can see only as errors and delusions; but this is often a measure of our anachronistic blindness." (3) Harrison follows this caveat with a stimulating analysis of that lost view of the world in which the earth's last days and the coming of Christ's Kingdom dominated the minds of its adherents. Harrison is concerned with popular, self-taught millenarians who were condemned to the fringes of respectability by contemporaries and have been largely ignored by historians.

Perhaps the most interesting figure is Joanna Southcott, an upholsterer from Devonshire who had a vision in 1792 commanding her to record and prophesy. During the 1790s she established a reputation in Exeter where she accurately foretold poor harvests, the war with France, the naval mutiny of 1797, and the death of the

local Bishop. By 1807 the number of those officially accepted into her fellowship had swelled to 14,000, and believers had come to see her as a prophetess whose warnings signalled the impending arrival of the millennium. Belief in the divine origins of Joanna's messages, Harrison argues, came easily to a labouring culture which accepted both supernatural explanations of ordinary events and the intervention of God in everyday life. Thus Harrison locates Joanna's millenarianism within the widespread practice of prophesying in eighteenth-century English popular culture and contends that it had more in common with the world of Bunyan and Milton than with our own.

Harrison estimates that 63 per cent of Joanna's following was female and that 67 per cent were single, or at least not connected with a family. These figures probably explain the attraction of her doctrine of the Woman, Joanna's belief that she had been called to defeat Satan in order to redeem women from the first sin of temptation in the garden of Eden. She believed that God had chosen her to redress the fate of Eve by delivering men from Satan's grip. This "theological feminism," Harrison suggests, enabled Joanna to reconcile her strong abstract attraction to sex with her repulsion to physical sex. These teachings gave her and her followers a sense of power in relations between the sexes, while enabling them to abstain from physical relationships with religious integrity.

The Second Coming also contains information on other millenarian groups and a valuable comparative chapter which treats the Shakers, Millerites, and Mormons in America. The last chapter, however, is most instructive for historians of the working class. Harrison advances three possible explanations along with their limitations. It is tempting, he suggests, to explain millenarianism as a psychological delusion, especially since some leading figures spent time in asylums. Indeed, contemporary critics often attributed these beliefs to mental disorders. Yet, Harrison

warns, "the gap between polite and popular culture was here very great. Millenarians did not accept the culturally dominant conception of reality, but inhabited a distinctive world of their own. In this (largely traditional) world madness was explained in terms of supernatural intervention, not as due to natural psycho-medical causes." (215) Assuming that madness is culturally defined, Harrison suggests that the medical and rational explanation of delusion had not penetrated deeply into popular culture. This was a world in which prophets like Joanna Southcott could credibly function. Harrison cautions against psychological reductionism, and he warns particularly that even individual signs of madness in some leaders should not be used to discredit the integrity of the large audiences of millenarian prophets.

Harrison found that millenarians were not drawn from the ranks of the poor, and he cautions against linking outbursts of millennial fervour with economic deprivation. Although lower and middle class participants in the movement may have been alienated from the traditional English social order, the progression to millenarianism was not automatic. Historians will need to know more about the social and personal circumstances of groups in specific locations before they can assume that millenarianism was a strategy for coping with alienation. Belief in the second coming of Christ did not make its adherents more powerful or comfortable, nor did it array forces of right against England's ruling class.

Turning to a discussion of the social context in which millenarianism flourished, Harrison addresses the hypothesis that such beliefs are popular during times of social stress and dislocation. Perhaps millenarianism provided a symbolic resolution to those troubled by the onset of industrialisation and the collapse of traditional forms of community. Again however, he warns that the interpretation of millenarian beliefs simply as "defences

against anxiety or compensations for inadequacies would be to subscribe to a very crude functionalism." (220) Our twentieth-century preoccupation for methods of allaying anxiety was not shared by eighteenth-century believers. In addition, although most people harbour desires to impose some rational order on the world around them, they are often looking not for elaborate intellectual explanations, but for "more limited emotional satisfactions." Millenarianism appealed to this need because it could be explained simply in Biblical language as an outgrowth of the traditional hope that God would soon intervene in history to make all things new. Further studies of millenarian movements, Harrison believes, will have to locate beliefs and motivations within the conventions of popular culture. "By the use of everyday events of life to interpret national, world and cosmic happenings," he concludes, "the millenarians reduced the scale and complexity of those happenings to the level of an ordinary person's understanding. Public history became simply individual histories on a grand scale." (228)

There can be no doubt that an anthropological sensitivity to the rituals of everyday life is essential for the recovery of religious habits of mind which the guardians of orthodoxy did not find accept-

able. To study symbolic realms of social action, Clifford Geertz has argued, "is not to turn away from the existential dilemmas of life for some empyrean realm of de-emotionalized forms; it is to plunge into the midst of them."⁵ But as Johnson's study of Rochester and Laqueur's study of the English Sunday School movement reveal, the use and meaning of religious values is class specific. Laqueur found that Sunday Schools helped working-class boys and girls to attain both skills and a sense of dignity in a social situation which otherwise forced deference upon them. Religious belief may have conferred legitimacy upon authoritarian institutions in Anglo-American history, but it has also lent ideological and institutional power to movements of liberation. If historians are to understand how religion has both inhibited and sharpened the political consciousness of working classes in past time, they will have to abandon the overly teleological interpretation that steadfastly moves preindustrial societies forward into secular modernity. This goal, yet unachieved, would be a service both to scholarship and to the lost believers we seek to understand.

⁵ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York 1973), 30.

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