

In the first chapter of *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Hatch introduces his thesis which states that "the theme of democratization is central to understanding the development of American Christianity, and that the years of the early republic are the most crucial in revealing that process." Hatch argues that the wave of popular religious movements during the first half of the 19th century were responsible for Christianizing American society. After the Revolutionary War ended, the United States experienced unprecedented growth due primarily to a high birth rate. Christianity boomed during these years. The rights of the common man and the individual conscience took center stage in the development of a religious America.

According to Hatch, the American Revolution and the beliefs flowing from it created a "cultural ferment" over the meaning of freedom. People began to think for themselves and formulated strong opinions concerning issues such as freedom, equality, sovereignty, and representation. As a result, respect for authority, tradition, station, and education eroded among average Americans.

Furthermore, Hatch argues that the fifty years following the Revolutionary War "left as indelible an imprint upon the structures of American Christianity as it did upon those of American political life." The press began to function as a "sword of democracy" by reviving the faith of ordinary working Americans. People began to speak out against civil authority and the mixing of church and state.

Following the theme of democratization, Hatch points out that the expansion of evangelical Christianity in the early 19th century was a result of ordinary people successfully shaping the culture. They focused upon their own priorities rather than the priorities of the elite. Popular religious movements of the early republic demonstrated a strong democratic spirit. These egalitarian movements rejected distinctions that set clergy apart from the laity. Ordinary people were empowered by movements which accepted their spiritual impulses rather than having the orthodoxy

of their beliefs scrutinized. Ironically, many of these movements were structured in highly undemocratic ways and gave much authority to leaders.

Hatch's second chapter addresses the crisis of authority experienced by some religious leaders following the Revolutionary War. Ministers such as Lyman Beecher openly displayed their disgust towards the increasing number of uneducated and untrained ministers. Beecher believed that "illiterate men have never been the chosen instruments of God to build up his cause." Well-known ministers such as Timothy Dwight (President of Yale) and Lyman Beecher believed clergy to be a separate order of men who were capable of elevating "mankind at large." Jefferson diarist, William Bentley, complained that the laity were now doing theology for themselves. However, itinerant ministers such as Billy Hibbard and Lorenzo Dow were offended by Dwight's and Beecher's aspersion of common preachers. Dow insisted that no gospel law existed that authorized any man to forbid or put up barriers to stop any man from preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The broader crisis of authority that dominated popular culture in the early years of the republic must also be analyzed in order to understand the struggle for religious authority between the elite and the commoners. During this period, organized political parties were formed and politics became heated and sometimes violent. Commoners began to launch attacks upon elite professions and slavery while also expressing new ideas pertaining to citizenship, representation, old age, and women's identity. Equality became the battle cry for these common folk who challenged every kind of political authority. Egalitarian principles were also expressed in hundreds of newly created newspapers and other publications which were written to appeal to a wider democratic public.

Hatch observes that since politics and society were no longer being monopolized by the elites, commoners were able to think for themselves in matters of religion. Dissenters on the east coast and in the frontier reconstructed Christianity into a popular theology which combined

elements of pop culture, renewed supernaturalism, Enlightenment rationalism, mystical experiences, biblical literalism and Jeffersonian rhetoric. The number of religious options available multiplied quickly.

These commoners or dissenters sharpened their reliance on the individual conscience. Hatch offers the examples of Caleb Rich, Elhanan Winchester, Elias Smith, and Abner Jones who all insisted that an unfettered conscience was necessary to read the Scriptures. With the individualizing of the conscience came the inversion of authority, according to Hatch. These commoners and their popular egalitarian theology inverted the traditional assumption that truth was more likely to be found "at the upper rather than at the lower reaches of society." Commoners attacked the clergy for taking a salary rather than living in poverty like Jesus did. Their methods and sole reliance on individual interpretation of Scripture threatened the orthodox elites such as Lyman Beecher.

In the third chapter, Hatch describes in detail the phenomenon of American camp meetings. These controversial meetings originated in Britain and were lead by Methodist ministers. Camp meetings were controversial because they involved unlicensed ministers who often encouraged uncensored highly emotional testimonies by any person regardless of age or sex. Though these meetings were disapproved of by British Methodist leaders, American Methodist leaders such as Francis Asbury championed camp meetings due to their popularity and success in recruiting new followers. Leaders of these popular meetings were charismatic and shared both a passion for expansion and were hostile to orthodox belief and style. Hatch concludes that the most distinctive feature of American Christianity during the era of the Second Great Awakening was not revivalism but instead a group of charismatic leaders who "proclaimed compelling visions of individual self-respect and collective self-confidence."

Young leaders such as Barton Stone, Elias Smith, and Francis Asbury constructed new ideologies from which popular religious movements coalesced. In their sermons, even the most

uneducated and inexperienced were invited to answer God's call to preach. Commoners were challenged to take religious destiny into their own hands by thinking for themselves and opposing any form of centralized authority. Due to the lack of intense opposition by a powerful religious establishment, these populist movements experienced great growth. At the turn of the 19th century, the powerful Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian Churches were in a temporary state of disarray. This allowed populist movements such as the Methodists, Baptists, and Christians free rein to experiment and organize. Hatch notes that in a democratic and rapidly expanding nation, groups such as the Presbyterians and Episcopalians could no longer assume that they would remain at the center of American culture. These denominations maintained their authority only by rarely exercising it.

Pluralism and diversity among the new movements made it possible for any American to find a satisfactory group despite his or her preference in belief, practice, or institutional structure. However, these new movements lacked the ecclesiastical walls of liturgy, governance, and theology that are normative in most traditions. With the focus on the egalitarianism of the common man, the question of who had authority was a challenge for the imminent future.

In the fourth chapter, Hatch examines five separate religious mass movements that became very popular during the early years of the republic. All of these movements, including the Christians, Methodists, Baptists, Mormons, and black churches shared a common style and demeanor. However, each movement stood apart from another in its theological emphasis and organizational structure. For example, John Leland's Baptists and Alexander Campbell's Disciples favored democratic church government while Francis Asbury's Methodists and Joseph Smith's Mormons insisted on government from the top down.

Led by Elias Smith, the Christian movement demanded a new kind of church based on democratic and egalitarian principles. Smith's movement championed the ability of the common

man to read and interpret the Scriptures on his own. The doctrine of priesthood of all believers came to mean "religion of, by, and for the people." Smith's oversimplified version of the gospel was laced with the language of politics. His newspaper (the first religious newspaper in the US) attacked everyone and anyone including Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, and Federalists of any religious persuasion. Christians such as Alexander Campbell used newspapers to mock the pretensions of clergy (i.e. their expensive clothes and lavish lifestyles).

The Christians preached the simple themes of sin, grace, and conversion. Fellowships were organized that resisted social distinctions and spontaneous experience was welcomed. Religion which seemed too formal was also denounced by the Christians. Hatch describes three areas in which Christians espoused reform. First, Christians called for a revolution within the church to place laity and clergy on an equal footing and to exalt the individual conscience above all other organizations. Second, Christians rejected traditional theology and sought a new view of history that welcomed inquiry and innovation. Finally, Christians called for a populist hermeneutic premised on the inalienable right of every individual to understand the New Testament for himself or herself. According to Hatch, the belief that biblical authority could emerge from the will of the people was the most enduring legacy of the Christian movement.

Other leaders in the Christian movement included James O'Kelly (VA), Barton Stone (KY), and Alexander Campbell (PA). In 1809, James O'Kelly and his 20,000 member Christian Connection merged with Elias Smith's Christians. Around 1830, Alexander Campbell's Disciples of Christ movement united with Barton Stone's Christians. By 1860, their denomination claimed over 200,000 adherents and had become the fifth largest Protestant body in the United States. Ironically, according to Hatch, Stone and Campbell's movement grew into major denomination "only by practicing the kind of organization the reformers had once hoped to stamp out. Instead of erecting a

simple church free from "learned theology" and authoritarian control, the Christians advocated their own sectarian theology and deferred denominational influence to a small group of men.

The Methodist movement in America was led by Francis Asbury. He believed that the episcopal system was the backbone of the Methodist movement and he sought to return the Methodist Church to the apostolic order of the New Testament. In his opinion, Methodists were uniquely apostolic because their entire organizational structure from bishop to circuit rider was committed to an apostolic order of sacrifice and itinerancy. The Methodist movement empowered unlearned men by enabling them to preach the gospel just as fishermen and tax collectors had done in the early years of the church. Asbury's episcopal vision was premised on his conviction that the first should come last and the last should come first.

Asbury introduced Methodism to thousands of young unpaid itinerants during his 31 years as Bishop. He transformed itinerancy into a disciplined way of life among young men who were mostly single, poor, and self-educated. By 1840, the Methodist movement had developed into a nationally respected denomination.

Hatch next focuses on John Leland, who was one of the most popular and controversial Baptists in America during the early years of the republic. Well-known as an ardent supporter of church-state separation, Leland was highly influential in petitioning the Virginia legislature on behalf of Thomas Jefferson's historic bill for religious freedom. Leland also led Virginia Baptists in their opposition to slavery. As an itinerant evangelist, Leland stood strongly opposed to clerical professionalism. He admitted that his calling had been "to watch and check clerical hierarchy, which assumes as many shades as a chameleon." Like the Christians, Leland exalted the individual conscience over creedal systems and local autonomy over powerful ecclesiastical structures. Leland emphasized that one's own conscience must be free from human control. Religion was a matter between only God and the individual. Hatch notes that Leland's democratic resistance to prescribed

clerical authority is crucial to understanding his important role in the religious affairs of the early republic.

During the last two decades of his life, Leland urged that Baptist localism not give in to the process of centralization. For example, he criticized the formation of national missionary boards, benevolent societies, and theological seminaries. In his concluding remarks, Hatch notes that Leland is important because he turned a "quest for self-reliance into a godly crusade."

Hatch considered black preachers to be the most striking examples of the democratization of American Christianity. Before the Revolutionary War, few blacks were Christians. In the following three decades, thousands of blacks embraced the faith. Hatch lists three reasons why blacks, slave and free, "swarmed" into Baptist and Methodist churches. First, these movements welcomed blacks as full participants in their communions while they also condemned slavery.

Second, blacks were attracted to a version of Christianity that was capable of being understood and experienced by the uneducated. Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Church, explained that the Methodists were successful because even "the unlearned can understand." These black preachers "nurtured the outpouring of communal ecstasy and championed spontaneous shouting, chanting and singing." Baptist and Methodist revivals offered a style of worship that represented a Christian "mirror-image" of a similar religious heritage that Africans had long known.

The third and final reason why blacks became Christians was due to the emergence of black preachers. Hatch notes that the surge of blacks, free and slave, into the Christian faith "paralleled the decisive rise of the black preacher." During this time period, black preachers pioneered independent and exclusive African-American congregations and seized every opportunity to organize distinct African-American communities. They were also able to form their own compelling versions of the gospel. In the hands of black preachers, the church served as a rallying point for human dignity, freedom, and equality for all.

The Mormons represent a fifth mass movement which furthered the democratization of American Christianity. Born into poverty and dismayed by sectarianism, founder Joseph Smith reached the conclusion that none of the current denominations preached an authentic faith. These groups had apostatized from the true and living faith. Known for his unusual spiritual powers, Smith sought for truth in unorthodox places. By 1827, Smith prophetically claimed to have discovered an instrument which supposedly gave him access to the long-lost story of God's work in America. Three years later, Smith published his Book of Mormon which told this long-lost story. According to Hatch, the themes of pride, wealth, learning, fine clothing, and oppression of the poor reappear throughout the Book of Mormon as the "principal objects of divine displeasure." The Mormon movement grew because devout followers such as Kimball Young were eager to follow a prophet who spoke with authority and sounded like a commoner. Many were drawn to a movement which returned power as in apostolic days to illiterate men such as themselves.

Hatch's fifth chapter explores the effects that the democratization of print media had on American Christianity after the Revolutionary War. Religious periodicals were essentially nonexistent at the turn of the 19th century. Only thirty years later, religious periodicals had become the "grand engine of a burgeoning religious culture." Print media effectively promoted populist religious movements and also served as a "bond of union" between competing groups. Before the Revolutionary War, print media only addressed issues of importance to the elites and clergymen. After the war, print media offered a democratic appeal to the masses. This new age of mass communication was driven by the belief that the common man could free himself from of elite domination and write whatever and whenever he wanted.

By 1830, the American Tract Society was annually publishing over one million Bibles and 16 million evangelistic tracts. This populist appeal to the religious press was due in part to the

absence of a strong ecclesiastical institution. Religious publishers were able to gain power, influence, and authority through democratic means: popular appeal.

Populist movements also revolutionized preaching. Hatch emphasizes that a firm commitment to lay preaching constituted the foundation of these insurgent movements. Folk preachers cloaked their sermons in "homely, colloquial language, that could be readily understood." Their coarse language, earthy humor, biting sarcasm, and commonsense mentality appealed to the uneducated common man. These vernacular sermons were filled with much emotion and enthusiasm.

Religious folk music was also popular among these new movements. Commoners had an insatiable appetite for spontaneous and lively gospel music. The freedom of expression given to blacks by the Methodist and Baptist movements gave birth to the popular black spiritual. The popularity of different strains of folk music made these religious movements more resistant to the influence of formal ecclesiastical authority. Hatch concludes that because of the democratization of print media, use of lay preachers, and the popularity of new forms of religious folk music, these populist movements were successful in delivering their message to the masses.

The sixth chapter explores the profound commitment of American churches to their audience. Insurgent leaders such as Alexander Campbell considered people's common sense to be more reliable, even in theology, than the judgment of the educated elite. Faith in public opinion became the new arbiter of truth. Theology was now measured by its level of acceptance in the religious marketplace. Characterized by anticlericalism, these leaders insisted that all distinctions between laity and clergy be abolished. They strongly believed that the removal of these distinctions would restore peace, harmony, and vitality to the Christian church.

Insurgents such as Elias Smith, Lorenzo Dow, Alexander Campbell, Francis Asbury, and Joseph Smith all shared the common belief that the Protestant Reformation had not restored

authentic Christianity. Based on this belief, each movement could confidently claim to be the "heaven-sent solution to the riddle of sectarianism." In their minds, these leaders were restoring the apostolic order of the early church and ushering in the millennial kingdom. American pop culture allowed these self-educated men to espouse millennial hopes. To the common folk, democracy became the cause of God.

Populist leaders were united in their opposition to the ecclesiastical tyranny of Calvinist orthodoxy. Calvinists' zeal for theological systems, doctrinal correctness, organizational control, and cultural influence proved threatening to populist movements. According to Hatch, people at the bottom end of the social scale rarely embraced the doctrines of predestination. The common man's anguish of injustice and poverty made unacceptable the idea that God randomly chose who could enter the pearly gates of heaven and who was damned to hell. In response to the Calvinist orthodoxy, groups such as the Methodists, Disciples, and Mormons made salvation "imminently accessible and immediately available." Hatch stresses that as people began to think theologically for themselves, they wrote off Calvinist orthodoxy as the "senseless jargon of election and reprobation."

By the mid 19th century, the populist religious movements of the early republic were undergoing a metamorphosis from alienation to influence. Hatch discusses this transformation in the seventh chapter. Methodists and Baptists churches had grown substantially wealthier. They built impressive sanctuaries, installed organs, and actually demanded college educated ministers. Members of these populist movements could even be seen in high levels of government at both the state and federal levels.

Many movements had achieved a level of regional respectability. In the south, Baptist and Methodist churches had become the pillars of their communities. Second generation Baptists, Methodists, and Disciples did not hide their desire to obtain a place of influence and respect in

society. The allure of respectability led these movements to build dozens and dozens of educational institutions throughout the United States. Baptists and Methodists alone founded over 30 colleges in 9 different states during this era. Hatch points out that religious populism had the unintended consequence of enhancing social mobility among its second generation adherents.

However, the formalization of these movements resulted in a backlash of populist dissent. During this time period, Charles Finney, a Presbyterian and lawyer, emerged from obscurity onto the national scene and became the most sought after preacher since George Whitefield. In his sermons, Finney depicted Calvinist orthodoxy as the disease which had infected the church. Finney praised the Methodist focus on "soul winning" and sought to make religious life audience-centered. Like others before him, Finney passionately argued that absolutely nothing should intervene between man's own mind and the Scriptures. Finney was successful in introducing democratic modifications into respectable religious institutions with his revivalistic "new measures."

Hatch observes that the formalization of revivalistic Protestantism during the mid-19th century was part of a larger trend to "bring discipline and consolidation to a culture marked by experimentation and novelty." Even leaders such as Alexander Campbell and Nathan Bangs reached the conclusion that democracy in church had gone far enough. In their opinion, individualism had become the lone-ranger variety. Due to their democratic appeal to the masses, these self-made leaders continued to gain power and prominence. According to Hatch, these men often walked a fine line between authentic servanthood and exploitive demagoguery.

Hatch's eighth and final chapter focuses on the recurring populist impulse in American Christianity. Despite the combination of modernity and religion, more Americans are religious than in any other western industrial society. In fact, two out of three adults in the United States admit to having fairly strong religious beliefs. Hatch emphasizes three distinct features in America concerning religion and society. These include the fervor of religion among ordinary people, the

continuing prominence of populist religious leaders, and the vitality of mass democratic movements that reflect the charisma and organizational skills of those leaders.

Powerful populist religious leaders have continued to play an important role in American Christianity since the 19th century. Their authority comes not from their education or status within major denominations but from the democratic art of persuasion. These populist leaders include religious pop culture icons such as Billy Graham, Robert Schuller, Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson.

Another recurring populist phenomenon can be seen in the strength of past and present democratic religious movements firmly identified with American popular culture. Movements such as the Baptists, Methodists, Mormons, Holiness, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Fundamentalists have all shared an anti-elitist and anti-centralist ideology. All of these movements have passionately communicated with and mobilized ordinary people and challenged them to take responsibility for their lives and to educate themselves. According to Hatch, their power sprang from their ability "to communicate with people at the culture's edge and to give them a sense of personal access to knowledge, truth, and power." Hatch concludes by citing the Fundamentalist and Pentecostal movements as the primary examples of populist religion today.

In his award-winning book, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Nathan Hatch suggests that the democratization of American Christianity occurred in the decades following the American Revolutionary War. The disestablishment of state churches and a move toward voluntary religion occurred. This new environment aided the move away from aristocratic and hierarchical colonial churches to a focus on the common man. Ordinary believers asserted the right to read the Bible by themselves rather than trust the state-supported clergy. In the era of Jacksonian democracy, Christianity was shaped by the common people and populist religion. The individual conscience was supreme. Religion, like politics, had become democratized.

The Democratization of American Christianity is both thoroughly researched and a pleasure to read. Hatch's book is a must read for all interested in the religious history of the United States. He persuasively demonstrates that the driving force behind populist religious movements were ordinary folk. Of the mass movements analyzed, all five were led by talented men who successfully combined Jeffersonian egalitarianism with a strong dose of both anticlericalism and anti-Calvinism.

The explosion of religious periodicals during the early years of the Republic revealed the strength of grassroots populism. Print media was not the exclusive property of the aristocrats. Similarly, the democratic appeal of blogs has revolutionized contemporary popular religion. At the 2006 annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, bloggers led a grassroots movement which resulted in Frank Page being elected President on the first ballot. Described by himself as an "irenic conservative," Page's victory was a blow to fundamentalist elites who have controlled the SBC in recent years. In other denominations such as the United Church of Christ, the democratic appeal of blogs has been utilized to increase support for their own political agenda.

However, I was disappointed that Hatch did not emphasize the role of women in the populist movements of the early republic. Clearly, women accounted for a large percentage if not a majority of each individual movement. Knowing that women often experience the same religion in very different ways, I would have liked to know what attracted them to these radical movements.

Without a doubt, *The Democratization of American Christianity* is an important book that should be read to understand the influence of populism upon American religion.