

God and Mammon: Protestants, Money, and the Market, 1790–1860. *Edited by Mark A. Noll*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. xii + 313 pp. Figures, tables, notes, index. Cloth, \$45.00; paper, \$21.95. ISBN: cloth 0-19-514800-2; paper 0-19-514801-0.

Reviewed by Peter J. Wosh

Money matters in American religion. Social critics and satirists, ranging in style and substance from Sinclair Lewis to Lenny Bruce, have always embraced and recognized this seemingly simple truth. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, the connections between commercial activity and church life entered public debate with a remarkable urgency. Protestant evangelicalism achieved a renewed visibility and prominence within mainstream American culture and politics, prompting considerable discussion and scrutiny. Crusading print reporters and cable commentators glibly interpreted the ways in which late-twentieth-century American religion intersected with American capitalism. Televangelist triumphs and scandals, a booming market for Christian-oriented consumer products, sophisticated religious fund-raising campaigns, and a new gospel of success literature all generated journalistic jeremiads. Simplistic conclusions concerning ecclesiastical hypocrisy and capitalist co-optation abounded. Not surprisingly, historical perspective appeared peculiarly absent from the contemporary debates. Pundits professed to discover a new nexus between counting house and meetinghouse. Even had they sought historical enlightenment, however, these critics would have discovered only a scanty, uneven, and somewhat dated literature. Neither religious historians nor business historians contributed much to the discussion. These distinct academic subcultures asked very different kinds of questions, published in separate journals, attended their own conferences, and remained faithful to their particular historiographical traditions. Their research agendas rarely intersected. Until now.

God and Mammon, which grew out of a 1998 conference entitled “Financing American Evangelicalism” and held at Wheaton College, brings together essays by eleven cultural, religious, economic, and political historians who have thought long and hard over the past two decades about matters of business and faith. Given the diversity of contributors and topics, no single connecting thesis dominates. A few generally shared

assumptions do link the historians. All reject the notion that religious belief merely constitutes some sort of secondary screen that masks economic motivations or social factors. Instead, they echo Mark Noll's observation that "for most antebellum Protestants economic reasoning remained superstructure and religion remained deep structure" (p. 277). These scholars further view religion as central to the very economy of antebellum America by 1860, especially as annual contributions to Protestant denominations and agencies nearly equaled the revenues of the federal government, and as the nation contained as many Methodist churches as post offices. The contributors cast a skeptical eye on explanations that overly simplify the relation between Protestantism and capitalism. They devote several chapters to demolishing quite effectively both E. P. Thompson's Marxist interpretation of British Methodism and Charles G. Sellers's reigning synthesis, which he sets forth in *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (1991). Sellers argues in part that many Christian denominations betrayed their anticapitalist origins in the early nineteenth century, providing ideological support for the expanding American market culture. Noll and his colleagues pay careful attention to particular local circumstances, to theological and social differences between the various Protestant polities, to debates within individual traditions, and to the precise religiously based meanings of the language that ministers and pamphleteers employed when discussing economic questions. In short, this monograph eschews easy explanatory and interpretive frameworks in the interest of presenting the always messy, sometimes contradictory, and frequently puzzling reality of antebellum religious life in all of its confusion. One interesting conclusion emerges from the scholarship. The evidence here suggests that many, perhaps most, religious folk enthusiastically participated in the dynamic capitalist economy without fundamentally compromising their religious beliefs and identities. Daniel Walker Howe illustrates in his essay the way in which evangelicalism promoted sober, reliable, polite, and temperate virtues that appeared compatible with an emerging middle-class sensibility embraced by many Christian urbanites. Similarly, Richard Pointer's examination of Philadelphia Presbyterians emphasizes the way in which Old Schoolers and New Schoolers reacted to the marketplace in nearly identical ways: they embraced many aspects, yet carefully held it at arm's length when it appeared incompatible with solid middle-class virtues or seemed to

challenge uncompromising Divine sovereignty over temporal affairs. Perhaps most suggestively, David Paul Nord's study of the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society, arguably two of the most sophisticated and mature national corporate enterprises in the antebellum United States, also yields some surprising conclusions. Nord argues that the Bible and tract society managers "made themselves practical businessmen, savvy marketeers, large-scale manufacturers, and grasping capitalists in order to save the country from the market revolution" (p. 165). Modern capitalist practices informed their institutional cultures and organizational mechanisms but never truly compromised their core missions. Only Kathryn Long's article on the urban revivals of 1857–58, near the very end of the period under discussion, suggests a more cautionary note. The careful and intentional marketing of these revivals through secular metropolitan dailies, and the emergence of the Christian businessman as an ideal revival "type" replacing the more traditional praying mother, signaled a new relation between revivalism and the market. These developments foreshadowed a late-nineteenth-century Protestantism that would prove much more compatible with the flash, wealth, and style of Gilded Age consumer capitalism than its antebellum predecessors would ever imagine possible. *God and Mammon* also raises two somewhat troublesome interpretive questions. First, although the authors attempt to cast a broad net, a disproportionate amount of their evidence has been drawn from Methodism, with some lesser consideration of the Presbyterians and other reformed traditions. Baptists seem puzzlingly neglected in most articles, given both their numerical significance and their often uncompromisingly Calvinist leanings. Other prominent denominations, such as the Disciples of Christ, Episcopalians, and Lutherans, rate only a handful of citations. This may simply reflect either the state of the current scholarship or the fact that the well-documented modernizing and bureaucratizing tendencies within Methodism make it a particularly interesting case study. Still, broader and more systematic denominational coverage might alter some conclusions. Second, a decidedly supply-side orientation characterizes the book. Belief often appears filtered through the words and actions of ministers and religious professionals, but we learn relatively little about how ordinary Christians actually behaved. Pointer's article hints at some inconsistency between belief and practice among Philadelphia Presbyterians, and more attention to these kinds of

issues would have been welcome. Generally, though, this book connects religious history and business history in important and constructive ways. Religion, after all, matters much in affairs of the purse.

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