

Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America. By David Paul Nord. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. viii + 212 pp. Notes, index. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-195-17311-2.

Reviewed by Peter Wosh

Over the past twenty years, David Paul Nord has authored a series of influential articles that have prompted historians to reexamine the complex relationships between sacred and secular organizations in antebellum America. He has carefully investigated the inner workings of bible and tract societies, revealed the ways in which not-for-profit philanthropies have incorporated cutting-edge technological and managerial innovations into their operations, and explored the regular reading habits of ordinary religious folk. Heretofore, his contributions have appeared primarily in such academic outlets as *Journalism Monographs*, the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, the *Journal of the Early Republic*, and various edited compilations. *Faith in Reading* reprints this important body of previously published work, while adding some additional authorial reflections on the nature of reading, publishing, and the print economy in the early-nineteenth-century United States.

Religious historians now routinely incorporate the language and concepts of the market revolution into their interpretative frameworks. Commodification, entrepreneurialism, supply-side economics, and rational-choice theory often appear as the principal theoretical preoccupations of scholars who study American Christianity. Nord inspired and informed some of this new work by demonstrating how antebellum religious publishers aggressively pioneered new forms of corporate organization in order to further their missions. He documented the ways in which these institutions established managerial hierarchies, introduced cost accounting and statistical fact gathering into their office routines, developed methods for recruiting and training personnel, and required their agents to use a series of standardized reporting forms and methods. All of these innovative business strategies occurred well before their general integration into most profit-oriented capitalist concerns.

Nord differs from many religious historians and sociologists, however, by painting a more nuanced picture of the relationship between not-for-profit and other corporate entities. Bible and tract societies never fully succumbed to secularizing forces, nor did they sacrifice their core missions in the interest of achieving financial gain. They experimented with a variety of retail arrangements and pricing structures in order to promote the universal circulation of their products. Managers balanced the demand to pursue frugal policies against the mandate to reach everyone with the Good News. Religious motivations usually carried the day, as societies eschewed fiscal conservatism in the interest of converting sinners and bringing free riders within the fold. Early bible societies even allowed gratuitous distribution by their auxiliaries in order to augment scripture circulation, though the managers eventually concluded that consumers would value bibles more if they paid at least a nominal sum. The American Tract Society spent recklessly, maintaining no endowment or cash reserves and routinely tempting fiscal fate by shipping books as rapidly as it could print them. Saving souls remained the overriding goal, and religious institutions sometimes jeopardized their long-term financial stability, even as they carefully implemented innovative short-term strategies designed to maximize their spiritual impact. As Nord observes, “Their work was *in* the market but not *of* it” (p. 63). They adopted commercial forms in the interest of combating commercial culture, always keeping a wary eye and a disapproving gaze on the excesses of the marketplace.

Nord does not focus exclusively on the supply side of the ministerial equation. The reading public also receives considerable attention, and the author offers some interesting, yet ultimately inconclusive, speculations regarding the consumers of religious texts. New England Puritans emphasized preaching and literacy, and they carefully constructed an institutional culture that nurtured reading and writing. Puritan divines firmly believed that texts conveyed clear and unambiguous meanings. They placed great stock in the notion of *sola scriptura*, for example, arguing that the word of God might easily be grasped by sincere believers, with no need for mediation or interpretation by priestly authorities. Such convictions prompted subsequent generations of evangelicals to organize massive scripture-distribution campaigns. They convinced themselves that

merely providing universal access to the bible, “without note or comment,” would unite an increasingly complex and heterogeneous nation.

Unfortunately for these nineteenth-century Protestants, however, texts remained open to multiple meanings and idiosyncratic interpretations. The democratization of print appeared fraught with dangerous perils as well as missionary opportunities. Texts proliferated and reading habits changed. cursory perusal replaced intensive scrutiny, and salacious novels now competed with orthodox religious tracts among a fickle and heterodox audience. Nord demonstrates that the religious societies not only provided consumers with cheap books but also expected their colporteurs to teach readers new methods to cope with the changing nature of print culture. Evangelicals created a well-defined canon of acceptable literature, encouraged Christians to contemplate a few classic texts in a sustained and serious manner, and stressed the importance of depth and permanency over novelty and fashion. Results, however, rarely matched expectations. Tract distributors confronted a complex and confusing consumer culture in antebellum America. They complained that ignorance and illiteracy appeared widespread, though religious books had penetrated even rural outposts and remote hinterlands. Some families valued books primarily as material objects, others could not distinguish bibles from biographies, and many viewed reading as a waste of time.

Still, it remains dangerous to draw definitive conclusions concerning antebellum readership patterns. The documentary difficulties deserve greater emphasis than Nord provides. First, tract distributors hardly constituted neutral or disinterested observers. Their outsider status limited their ability to penetrate local communities, and administrative pressures encouraged them to skew their observations in particular ways. Second, the religious philanthropies found it convenient to use overblown rhetoric and create a sense of cultural crisis in order to stimulate interest in their work. Home-office bureaucrats carefully edited colporteur reports for publication in order to make the bible and tract causes more attractive to donors and supporters. Finally, the available archival evidence remains inconclusive. Actual manuscript accounts appear scarce, sources seem unduly weighted toward such peculiar settings as the New Jersey pine barrens, and readers’ words are filtered through the writings of bible and tract distributors. It seems fair only to acknowledge that diversity characterized antebellum print culture and reading

practices. Bible and tract societies never controlled the publishing marketplace to their own satisfaction, though they did establish an important presence and retain significant cultural influence. Nord's growing body of work has successfully forced both religious and business historians to pay greater attention to these fascinating, persistent, and remarkably energetic evangelical institutions. He has also demonstrated that religious history and business history have much to learn from each other.

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