

Michael P. Young. *Bearing Witness against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xi + 248 pp. \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-96086-9.

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“Confess Your Faults One to Another”: Religion and Reform in the Antebellum Era

From the vantage of the 1930s, looking back one hundred years, the historian Arthur Young Lloyd drew unambiguous conclusions about antebellum American reform. “The North was conducive to the birth and development of various reforms, crusades, fanatical doctrines, and peculiar religious beliefs ... which today seem both remarkable and pathetic.”[1] Enthusiasts bore too close a resemblance to communists, fascists, and millennial holy rollers of the Depression era. A few years later Avery Craven argued that abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison was, like Yankee zealots generally, a dangerous crank. In the late 1950s Craven delivered the Fleming Lecture at LSU, in which he described America’s first “cold war.” “Extremists”—fire-eaters in the South and raving abolitionists in the North—“made war inevitable.”[2] Other historians in 1950s also heard echoes of the present in the past. Richard Hofstadter famously described Populist and agrarian rebels as wide-eyed radicals, akin to red-baiting demagogues.

Fittingly, then, Lawrence J. Friedman has observed that abolitionist historiography often reflects the concerns of contemporary historians. The rehabilitation of antebellum reformers in the 1960s illustrates as much. Contributors to the 1965 collection, *Anti-Slavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists* carried the moral outrage of the civil rights movement back to the pre-Civil War era. “Committed as they are to the current civil rights struggle,” the volume’s editor Martin Duberman stated, “many historians are now predisposed to look kindly on an earlier movement of roughly analogous out-

lines.”[3] And so it goes. Later scholars viewed the antebellum moral crusade against drink, prostitution, and slavery variously as evidence of social control, organizational development, and religious cultural identity.

One of the more interesting chapters in Michael P. Young’s illuminating *Bearing Witness against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement* surveys the ever-changing interpretative literature on evangelical reform. Here Young discusses the shifts in emphasis and focus from the revisionists of the 1930s and 1940s to the cultural history and sociology of recent years. He rightly perceives that historians and sociologists seldom take seriously reformers’ emotion and sentiment. “But the driving force behind these movements,” Young remarks, “was the coming together of religious schemas that alloyed self-scrutiny to national piety” (p. 28). By the 1830s, evangelicals of various stripes had brought matters of personal, private morality to the public realm.

He makes a compelling case. Drawing on the insights of Alexis de Tocqueville Young notes that in the early nineteenth century the United States was an expanding nation with weak national institutions. Few institutions could, like evangelical denominations and para church organizations, unite thousands in a common cause across space and time. Evangelicalism brought together countless reformers. Young finds that the reformist union linked two broad traditions: genteel orthodox Presbyterianism and Congregationalism and rowdy, populist Methodism and Baptism. The former brought with it a

sophisticated notion of sin, while the latter brought with it an emphasis on confession.

The orthodox and populist strains only came together in whirlwind of fierce debate and religious controversy. Orthodox theologians like Samuel Hopkins, who was influenced by the wave of eighteenth-century revivals, reworked Calvinism: "sin was selfishness: the choosing of self over God. Virtue was disinterested benevolence: a selfless and holy affection for God and for being in general" (p. 64). Hopkins's New Divinity influenced a generation of young Presbyterian and Congregational theologians and ministers. Critics lashed out at this recent Arminian heresy, which stressed good works and encouraged involvement in benevolent societies. Missionary organizations, moral reform societies, and temperance crusades flourished from the mid-1820s through the 1830s. Advocates stood fast against an array of "special sins." As Arthur Tappan and Justin Edwards poured their energies and cash into reform causes, esteemed ministers like William Ellery Channing worried that organized benevolence would supplant churches.

At the other end of the spectrum conservative Protestants recoiled in horror at the sight of boisterous Methodist and Baptist revivals. "Crazy" Lorenzo Dow or Peter Cartwright, known fondly as "God's plowman," scandalized their cultured despisers in New England. Second Great Awakening preachers' emotional appeal to sinners and their calls for public confession of sin struck refined observers as vulgar, profane, and of shockingly recent vintage. Indeed, Young shows that frontier revivalists and middle-class preachers like Charles Finney abandoned the notion of a previous generation that conviction of sin and salvation would be a long, drawn-out process. It could be claimed in an instant. These evangelicals not only believed in a short path to salvation, they also thought it necessary to speed up the workings of guilt by "outing" sinners in public. It was a short step to apply similar shaming tactics to alcohol sellers, pimps, or individuals with any ties to the "peculiar institution."

Young ably moves from a discussion of Finney's new measures and a retooled *ordo salutis* to the most controversial, incendiary reform of the era, abolitionism. By the early 1830s William Lloyd Garrison was decrying slavery as a national sin. He now demanded immediate, not gradual, emancipation. Arthur Tappan and Theodore Weld followed Garrison's lead. In the coming years Luther Lee, a Wesleyan Methodist preacher and theologian who was heavily influenced by Garrison, came to think slavery "must be morally wrong, [and] sin in itself." The issue

was clear to other Wesleyans scattered across New York and Massachusetts. "All who are voluntarily in church-fellowship with slaveholders sanction slavery," declared one minister.^[4] Young looks at influential converts to immediatism in a captivating chapter titled "To Bear Witness to the Horrors of the Southern Prison House." He recounts the experiences of Garrison, Weld, Elizur Wright, Jr., James Birney, and Sarah and Angelina Grimké. Each "took different paths to their abolitionist commitments." All, however, had come into contact with agencies of organized benevolence (p. 194). In addition, they were all restless souls.

Young concludes his book with a brief look at the legacy of antebellum reform. "Far-flung social problems like drinking and slavery were grasped as immediate, personal sins," he comments (p. 202). This tradition, he writes, influenced the modern African American freedom struggle, student protest in the 1960s, environmentalism, and gay and lesbian liberation.

Young's excellent work of historical sociology is not without faults. His argument about the long-term influence of antebellum reformers, though provocative, could have received far more attention. It is also still somewhat unclear why some evangelicals gravitated to ultraist reform and others did not. Many who championed temperance in the 1830s would never become abolitionists. What made radical reformers unique? How does one account for the minority who adopted immediatism in the 1830s? In addition, some coverage of the perfectionist roots of reform would also have been useful. Were reformers of the 1830s like those perfectionist "ecclesiastical abolitionists" Douglas Strong has studied? Were there broader perfectionist forces at work, as Timothy Smith wrote about half a century ago? ^[5] Beyond that there are some stylistic hiccups that copyeditors at the University of Chicago Press should have corrected. The prose, at times, is jargon-heavy and there are repetitious passages scattered throughout the text.

These mild reservations do not detract from an otherwise superb work. Young's work clearly reveals the deep religious roots of reform. All scholars with an interest in the antebellum era or the larger currents of reform in American history should read this extraordinary book.

Notes

[1]. Arthur Young Lloyd, *The Slavery Controversy, 1831-1860* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939): 58.

- [2]. Avery Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942): 136; Craven, *Civil War in the Making, 1815-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959): 114.
- [3]. Lawrence J. Friedman, "Abolitionist Historiography 1965-1979: An Assessment," *Reviews in American History* 8, no. 2 (June 1980): 200-205. Martin Duberman, ed., *Anti-Slavery Vanguard: New Essays on the Abolitionists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965): ix.
- [4]. P. R. Sawyer, "Methodist Abolitionism—Sin to Remain in the Church," *True Wesleyan* (Boston), 1 April 1843, 1. Lucius C. Matlack, "Methodist Abolitionism," *True Wesleyan*, 25 February 1843, 1.
- [5]. Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999); Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957).

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