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Jewel L. Spangler. *Virginians Reborn: Anglican Monopoly, Evangelical Dissent, and the Rise of the Baptists in the Late Eighteenth Century.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2008. Maps, table. viii + 288 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2679-7.

Reviewed by Vassiliki Karali (University of Edinburgh)
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Eighteenth-Century Baptist Expansion in Virginia: Some Myths and Realities

In *Virginians Reborn*, Jewel L. Spangler offers a close examination of the rise of the Baptists in Virginia in the second half of the eighteenth century. In this, she joins a host of historians of the present generation who have set out to reexamine carefully the religious history of the colonial era and the early Republic with an aim to "assess the emergence of the Bible Belt and understand the nature and rise of evangelicalism in the nation" (p. 2). In this sense, Ellen Eslinger, John Sparks, Janet Moore Lindman, Monica Najar, and Philip N. Mulder–to name but a few–can be deemed Spangler's like-minded colleagues. Lindman has studied Baptist households in Pennsylvania and Virginia, Eslinger and Sparks examined evangelicalism in Kentucky and Appalachian North Carolina, while Najar and Mulder endeavored to analyze the specific character of evangelical revivals in the South.[1] To produce more accurate results, historians tend to adopt a localized perspective, as well as new concepts in historiography, such as gender, race, and household privacy. This trend has produced significant work on the early religious history of America to the extent that doubt is being cast on various stereotypical ideas that have previously misguided the study of Evangelicals. One of these is the perception of Baptists as distinctive people, who operated in opposition to the dominant social and political order of the time. Spangler convincingly argues against this view, while she endeavors to place their activities in the correct religious, social, and political context. In this respect, she devotes a large part of his book to the description of the contours of Baptist expansion. These included the Church of England and the activities of Presbyterians, as well as the War of Independence and its repercussions on early American religious and political culture.

Virginians Reborn is organized in six chapters. In the first chapter, Spangler describes the strengths and weaknesses of the Anglican Church, which made possible the expansion of Baptists at the end of the eighteenth century. She argues that the Church of England was omnipresent in the life of its parishioners, especially in the tidewater region. The vestries selected the minister and were in charge of the financial administration of the parish, while the churchwardens endeavored to correct those who were not church regulars and catered for the dispossessed. In addition, a flourish in church building between 1730 and 1749 meant that the church strengthened its hold on the colony. Nevertheless, the Anglican Church endured weaknesses in its operation, such as the recruitment of low-paid Scottish ministers, its unattractiveness to slaves and European settlers, persistent ministerial vacancies, and incompetence. These factors reduced the impact of the Church of England on the lives of Virginians, particularly in the West. Moreover, the absence of a resident bishop, who would have confirmed the youth, the growing number of unchurched population, and large parishes facilitated the task of dissenters. The latter made inroads into the colony, starting from its periphery.

In the second chapter, Spangler studies the Presbyterians, evangelical dissenters, who had expanded in Virginia between 1740 and 1758, immediately before the Baptists. She endeavors to analyze the reasons behind their spread and the nature of their beliefs. She argues that due to their frequent services, Presbyterians were successful in regions where the Anglican Church was weak, namely in the Piedmont and the valley of Virginia. Uneducated people and slaves were attracted to Presbyterian emotional worship, its emphasis on biblical simplicity, and psalm singing. Presbyterians were, therefore, particularly appealing to those whom the Church of England failed to reach. That is the reason why–Spangler notes–Presbyterians did not operate as social outcasts in

opposition to the established church and authorities, but in a complementary way to them. Besides, Presbyterian adherents represented a cross-section of society; they were involved in slaveholding and in patriarchal ways of household management, while the Presbyterian Church government featured few democratic elements.

In the third chapter, Spangler enters into her main theme, which is the rise and expansion of the Baptists in Virginia. She starts her investigation by describing the distinctiveness of Baptist worship, namely, its emotive aspect and adult Baptism. She then maintains that one of the main reasons for their success was the ability of the Baptists to recruit fast inspiring preachers, who would engage in itinerancy and revival meetings. She also suggests that the Baptists, like the Presbyterians, profited from the institutional weaknesses of the Anglican Church. These weaknesses included poor ministerial supply and inadequate responses to the threat of dissenters, particularly in the valley, the Southwest, and the northern neck of Virginia. In the tidewater, the loss of status endured by the local Anglican elite, anticlericalism, and disputes within the Anglican camp facilitated the task of the Baptists.

In the fourth chapter, Spangler examines further the character of the Baptist faith and social conduct, as experienced in the eighteenth century. She suggests that the strictness with which the Baptists enforced their views on morality, the spread of unlicensed preachers, and a relatively "democratic" church administration led their contemporary critics and historians to brand them as revolutionaries. After close examination, Spangler maintains that Baptist distinctiveness was limited. Baptist congregations were socially diverse, and they embraced the norms of the dominant order through patriarchy, office holding, and slaveholding. Moreover, on the eve of the War of Independence, they shared the concerns of the political and moral authorities on such issues as propriety in sexual conduct, drinking, frivolous spending, church attendance, and revelry.

In the fifth chapter, Spangler describes in detail the conversion to the Baptist faith. She presents it as a three-part process, which included conviction of one's sins, a liminal-transitional phase, and final conversion. The Baptists were attacked by their critics because of their detachment from their previous social environment during conversion and due to the intense emotionality of the revival meetings. Spangler ascribes the distinctiveness of Baptist communities to the close ties held between their members and the breakdown of privacy barriers between them. In this context, old social hierarchies were eliminated. Household heads had to give up some of their privileges to submit themselves to the scrutiny of their fellow congregants.

In the final chapter, Spangler explores the reasons behind the Baptists' expansion at the end of the eighteenth century. She argues that through the Revolutionary War experience, the dominant political culture underwent a change that brought it closer to the ways of the Baptists. In the meantime, the latter adjusted their organization and political rhetoric to integrate better than in their early stages with the political and social landscape of the time. The increased emphasis placed on merit and the fact that free white adult males acquired more rights in Virginia at the end of the revolutionary period were advancements close to the culture of the Baptists, who themselves valued spiritual gifts and merit. At the same time, the Baptists approached aspects of the main political and social norms. They supported the patriot cause, established an increasing number of permanent congregations, and encouraged their members to maintain the social ties that they held prior to converting. These adjustments in Baptist practices together with the disestablishment of the Church of England in 1786 quelled opposition to the new sect and allowed it to move closer to the mainstream of southern religious culture in the nineteenth century.

Spangler's *Virginians Reborn* is an excellent work of scholarship that describes in detail the world of early Baptists in Virginia. The wealth of resources used is remarkable. These include–apart from sermons and contemporary lay accounts–tax and court records, vestry minutes, and Baptist churches' minute books. This diversity of material has allowed the author to examine closely and vividly Baptist practices and ideas, along with responses of non-Baptists to the Baptist expansion. She has achieved so without drowning the narrative with statistical jargon and elaborate socioeconomic analysis. Moreover, she exhibits a depth of knowledge of the religious, political, and religious history of the era, which provided a context to the Baptist expansion. The first two chapters of the book examine this historical background and serve adequately as an introduction to the main topic. Spangler's analysis is accompanied by two maps and a table, although more maps illustrating the religious geography of Virginia would have been helpful to the reader.

The major strength of *Virginians Reborn* is the way in which the author engages in historiographic debate. Spangler challenges set ideas on such issues as the character of the rise of the Presbyterians, the extent of Baptist distinctiveness, and the circumstances that allowed

Baptist expansion after the War of Independence. So far, historians have offered few inspiring comments on these questions. Assisted by local evidence, Spangler examines them in a refreshing, new way, presenting alternative suggestions in a convincing fashion. As a result, she contributes constructively to the debate in the field. In this sense, *Virginians Reborn* is useful both for courses on the religious history of America and as an exemplary piece of high-quality academic research and methodology, valuable to any historian.

Note

[1]. Janet Moore Lindman, "A World of Baptists: Gender, Race and Religious Community in Pennsylvania and Virginia, 1689-1825" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1994); Janet Moore Lindman, "Acting the Manly Christian: White Evangelical Masculinity in Revolutionary Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 57 (2000): 393-441; Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); John Sparks, *The Roots of Appalachian Christianity: The Life of Elder Shubal Stearns* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001); Monica Najar, *Evangelizing the South: A Social History of Church and State in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Philip N. Mulder, *A Controversial Spirit: Evangelical Awakenings in the South* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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