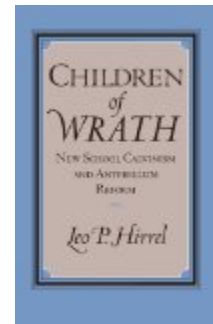


# H-Net Reviews

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Leo P. Hirrel. *Children of Wrath: New School Calvinism and Antebellum Reform*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. x + 248 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2061-4.

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## The Empire Strikes Back

In *Children of Wrath*, Leo P. Hirrel has given us a tightly reasoned exploration of the influence of New School Calvinism on antebellum reform. He is of course not the first to write about the connection between religion and reform, but he does so in a way that helps to clarify the religious motivations of some of the most influential antebellum reformers. While the trend in recent scholarship has been to suggest that Calvinism faded into obscurity after the American Revolution, Hirrel argues that this just wasn't so, at least for a modified version of Calvinism.

One of the most influential books ever written about American religion is Timothy Smith's *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War*, published in 1957. Smith's central thesis is that the "Arminian" revivalism and perfectionism that "flourished increasingly between 1840 and 1865" led America's leading denominations to become increasingly involved in social reform. These revivalistic religious groups, particularly the Methodists, Baptists, and New School Presbyterians, led the way in the crusade to reform America, playing "a key role in the widespread attack upon slavery, poverty, and greed." [1] While Smith's argument was influential in its time, many who came after him interpreted antebellum reform far differently. Later interpreters often made a good deal less of the religious convictions of the reformers, choosing instead to highlight economic and materialistic considerations.

But this may now be changing. Over the past decade or so, a number of works have appeared emphasizing the

strength and importance of religion, especially popular religion, in the lives of antebellum Americans. Books by Nathan Hatch, Jon Butler, and Paul Johnson and Sean Wilentz have been among the more important works dealing with the growing influence of religion in the early republic. [2] More specifically, a number of works have recently appeared reevaluating the connection between religion and reform. Along with *Children of Wrath*, these include Robert Abzug's *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination*. [3] While Abzug and Hirrel share many of the same concerns, they approach their topics quite differently.

*Children of Wrath* is divided into two parts with five chapters each. In the first part, Hirrel explains the development of New School Calvinism following the Revolution. The story he tells here is one of theological adaptation, as Calvinist theologians "began making 'improvements' on traditional theology in order to make Calvinism more acceptable to their audiences" (p. 18). In Chapter One Hirrel discusses some of the earliest attempts to reinvigorate Calvinism. Among the first of these reformulations was Samuel Hopkins's "New Divinity," also known as "Hopkinsianism." Largely a response to Deism and rationalistic thinking, Hirrel argues that New Divinity was more optimistic than previous Calvinism. Though God still damned sinners, he would do so far less often as the millennium approached. Hopkins's colleague Joseph Bellamy actually calculated that "at least 17,456 souls would be saved for every one lost" by the end of the millennium (p. 20)!

Chapter Two turns to the development, beginning in the 1820s, of New School Calvinism, or New Haven theology, as it was also known. The idea that “reformed theology was completely compatible with human standards of reason, morality, and justice” was a foundational concept of New School theology (p. 28). This, as Hirrel points out, represented a significant shift away from the traditional Calvinist emphasis on God’s sovereignty and humanity’s dependence. Chapter Three compares the differences between Princeton Seminary and Oberlin College. While Oberlin, largely under the influence of Charles Finney, effectively repudiated Calvinism, Princeton established a reputation for defending Calvinist orthodoxy. Oberlin and Princeton represented radical and conservative challenges to New School thinking, but in the end Hirrel implies that neither was as important as is generally assumed.

Chapter Four discusses the relationship between antebellum Congregationalists and Presbyterians with regard to New School theology. It is here that Hirrel gives short biographies of the six New School leaders who provide much of the primary sources that undergird this study: Nathaniel William Taylor, Lyman Beecher, Albert Barnes, George B. Cheever, George Duffield, and Moses Stuart. Under their leadership, New School Congregationalists and Presbyterians pulled together to face the challenge of Methodist and Baptist growth. Chapter Five continues this theme of the New School response to the changing religious environment of the early republic. As Hirrel points out, the New Schoolers were well aware of the challenges they faced and worked to accommodate to the tenor of the times. They believed that the United States had a special divine mission, and that their ideas would play an important part in fulfilling that destiny.

Having established the theological vision of New School Calvinism in part one, part two turns to how these ideas shaped the way that New Schoolers looked at reform. Hirrel looks at four reform movements: anti-Catholicism, temperance, antislavery, and the work of six major benevolent societies. Chapter Six deals with anti-Catholicism. I suspect that more than a few readers will balk at including anti-Catholicism as a reform movement. But Hirrel argues that the New School Calvinists he is looking at saw it as such, treating it exactly as they treated other reform activities, for exactly the same reasons. While we would not see anti-Catholicism as a reform, they “applied an entirely different frame of reference” (p. 184). These reformers conceived of their opposition to Catholicism as “an expression of disinterested benevolence” (p. 93). Hirrel argues that New School-

ers were “primarily concerned with the religious aspects of anti-Catholicism” (p. 95). “Their emphasis on human depravity led them to contend that the Catholic Church promised salvation without reform to unregenerate humans” (p. 101). Hence, until Catholicism could be overthrown, true reform was not possible among the growing Catholic portion of the population. Though primarily a religious problem, Catholicism inevitably posed political and social dangers in the eyes of these reformers. The anti-Catholicism of the New Schoolers is noteworthy, argues Hirrel, because it “conformed so closely to the logic of their theology and philosophy” (p. 115).

Chapter Seven looks at the New School contribution to the temperance crusade. Here again, Hirrel argues that it was the religious convictions of these reformers that motivated their involvement in temperance reform and that pushed them toward the more radical margins of the movement. New Schoolers were among those calling for total abstinence. “Believing that moral truths were fixed and immutable,” writes Hirrel, “New Haven adherents were unwilling to accept the idea that alcohol could be acceptable under some circumstances and unacceptable under others” (p. 117). Hence, some New School reformers adopted the “two-wine theory,” arguing that the “good” wines in the Bible actually contained no alcohol. Chapter Eight discusses the New School’s involvement in antislavery reform. Though few New School reformers became radical abolitionists, they did increasingly come to see slavery as a great moral evil. Hirrel argues that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is very much a product of this New School thinking about slavery.

Chapter Nine focuses on the involvement of New School reformers in seven benevolent organizations—the American Bible Society, the American Sunday School Union, the American Tract Society, the American Education Society, the American Home Missionary Society, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. “Believing in the viciousness of the non-Christian population,” these organizations “focused their energies on bringing the Gospel to the unenlightened. Their assurance of an objectively valid truth inspired them to apply their own religious principles universally...they did not perceive a need to restructure the economic or social organization of Northern society, for they believed that society could be improved through the promotion of true religion” (p. 169). Finally, Chapter Ten deals with the decline of New School reform, beginning with the Presbyterian schism of 1837. While New School Presbyterians became increasingly more conser-

vative, Congregationalists became in general more liberal. By the 1850s, New School Calvinists were fairly isolated.

*Children of Wrath* is cogently organized, well researched, and, within its self-imposed limits, convincingly argued. It represents a significant refinement of our understanding of antebellum reform. Hirrel turns aside from debates over whether reformers were displaced elites seeking social control, post-Calvinist optimists, or precursors to modern liberalism to forge a new understanding of the religious motivations of a small but important group of antebellum reformers.

Hirrel is convincing when he argues that New School theology lay behind the thinking of the reformers he deals with. In this sense, Hirrel perhaps has a deeper appreciation for the ins and outs of New Haven theology than does Robert Abzug. But Abzug's is a far more expansive vision of the connection between religion and reform. Abzug describes Lyman Beecher, for example, as someone who "audaciously reconceived the cosmos," rather than as a devotee of New Haven theology.[4] For Abzug, as for Timothy Smith, Beecher is an evangelical rather than a Calvinist. The difference is significant. At work here is what J.H. Hexter once referred to as the difference between "lumpers" and "splitters." Lumpers are those historians who look for sweeping trends and broad connections. Splitters are more interested in resifting the evidence of seemingly familiar topics to find new angles of interpretation. Of course, like all generalizations, this one quickly breaks down. No one is strictly a lumper or a splitter. But there is a grain of truth to the characterization. In this case, I think that Abzug and Smith might be seen as lumpers, while Hirrel is more of a splitter.

While Hirrel is clearly aware of the limits of his study, he argues that New School Calvinists exerted an influence beyond their numbers, primarily through their leadership of reform organizations. He also downplays charges from liberals (Finney and his followers) and conservatives (Charles Hodge and like-minded orthodox Calvinists at Princeton Seminary) that New School Calvinism was not really Calvinism at all. Timothy Smith happily accepted this charge, thereby lumping together New School Calvinists with the Methodists and Baptists. Like Abzug, Smith addresses a much broader vision of reform than does Hirrel. Smith's disregard for the particulars of New School Calvinism allows him to include New School reformers in his story. Here Hirrel is probably closer to the truth for the small group of reformers he examines. But I wonder to what degree most "New School" Presbyterians and Congregationalists (the

proverbial person in the pew) fully understood and embraced New Haven theology? In other words, how far beyond the small group of leaders that Hirrel focuses on did New School reform extend as a distinct and coherent system, particularly after 1837? Are there clear correlations between social standing and involvement in New School reform? How actively did women support New School reforms? Here, more attention to rank and file New School adherents (including those farther down the socioeconomic scale) would have been helpful. Also helpful would have been more discussion of how New School reformers differed from, and interacted with, other antebellum reformers. Some readers may also object to the limited number of reforms that Hirrel considers. In short, while Hirrel has done some admirable splitting, he leaves me wanting more lumping.

That *Children of Wrath* left me with these kinds of questions is not much of a complaint. Good books always leave readers wanting more. *Children of Wrath* represents a significant contribution to our understanding of antebellum religion and reform. Hirrel has succeeded in showing that New School Calvinism was a primary motivating force for a number of leading antebellum reformers.

#### Notes

[1]. Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestants on the Eve of the Civil War* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957; reprint, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 8.

[2]. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1990); Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Also see Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeepers Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

[3]. Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[4]. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 38.

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