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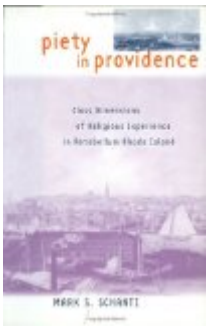

Mark S. Schantz. *Piety in Providence: Class Dimensions of Religious Experience in Antebellum Rhode Island.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000. xiii + 280 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-2952-1.

Reviewed by Daniel P. Jones

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In this solid monograph Mark Schantz describes and analyses the "bifurcation" of Providence's religious experience from an organic one that united rich and poor to a stratified world of opposing bourgeois and plebeian cultures. He begins by analyzing the earlier picture of Providence at the turn of the nineteenth century. The town's four churches drew members from all walks of life and considered it their duty to provide material aid to the poor in their midst; ministers sermonized on the need to temper the pursuit of individual success with attention to the needs of larger society.

In the meantime, a "plebeian" religious culture arose in Rhode Island's rapidly growing mill villages (p. 76). There, Freewill Baptists and Methodists practiced an emotional, anti-Calvinistic faith that relied heavily on the power of individual preachers, including women, and very little on church architecture. With the revival of 1819, the plebes gained a foothold in Providence. In addition to working-class Freewill Baptist and Methodist congregations, the decade of the 1820s witnessed the formation of an all-African American church and a more middle class Universalist Church that, nevertheless, spouted radical-sounding democratic rhetoric.

Schantz rightly shows awareness of the mutability of working-class religion, as once-radical-sounding sects, such as the Methodists, became respectable in Providence within less than a generation; replacing them in the 1830s and 1840s were three disparate groups. The first, Irish Catholics, were certainly lowly in social standing, though they differed from plebeian Protestants theologically. Mormons had a theology that criticized worldliness and the oppression of the poor. And the third group, the Millerites, demonstrated an implicitly anti-bourgeois mentality by passively waiting for the millennium to come, instead of searching for riches actively in the market place.

As the working classes formed their own congregations, the traditional Calvinistic Baptist, Episcopal, Congregational, and Unitarian churches wholeheartedly embraced a "bourgeois religious culture" (p. 119). Though espousing different theologies, the four different denominations were united by: (1) the practice of selling ever more

costly pews, (2) a preference for a religion of the head over the heart, and (3) an open embrace of the individual pursuit of wealth. They were divided only by gender, as some of their women's groups criticized the evil effects of business practices on the city's impoverished. Schantz correctly points out that the feminization of religion in the 1800s has been "overstated ... inasmuch [that] the acquisition ... of property, the collection of money for church buildings, and the auction of pews, remained a masculine exercise in public institution building" (p. 106).

The two cultures came to clash during and after Rhode Island's Dorr War, which pitted popular forces seeking to eliminate the state's anachronistic suffrage requirements against a conservative "Law and Order" party. A Universalist and several Freewill Baptist preachers explicitly defended the Dorrites. Meanwhile, the bourgeois ministers condemned the rebels as anarchists and their church hierarchies expelled Dorrites as members. Interestingly, bourgeois women continued to provide a critique of their own class, organizing as "suffrage ladies" to provide aid to imprisoned rebels. But by the 1850s, the bourgeoisie had consolidated control over Providence's religious culture. Formerly plebeian churches had all become respectable; female reformers joined ranks with the men to establish quiescent shelters of moral uplift for the poor; and the Catholics were ignored by all.

The author uses a wide variety of sources and methodologies to craft his tale: church membership records, city directories, and tax figures to calculate the relative wealth and social standing of churches; anthropological analyses of parades and street theater to analyze the gendering of religious experience; and traditional literary documentation to examine the thoughts of the area's ministers, missionaries, radicals, and ordinary laypersons.

Schantz's work falters only in his chapters on plebeian culture and the Dorr Rebellion, where he relies on literary evidence almost exclusively. The analysis of plebeian religious culture provides little data on the social and economic status of the Millerites and Mormons, and their relationship to the Freewill Baptists and Methodists, who suddenly and somewhat confusingly disappear from view. Likewise, the Dorr War chapter leaves unstudied the exact identity of the mass of Dorrites (if impossible to ascertain, Schantz should say so).

More seriously, much of chapter five, "The Emergence of Plebeian Religious Culture," which covers the late 1820s through the 1840s, seems miscast. The very title suggests that this "culture" did not begin to form until the Jacksonian period, when the rest of Schantz's book argues powerfully that it originated in the early 1810s. Or are we talking about two types of cultures here, with lower- and upper-case "c"s? Also, rather than offering a set of similar behaviors and beliefs that arguably add up to a coherent culture, Schantz provides the reader with the following melange of poorly connected individuals and movements: Catholic immigrants, with their beliefs in miracles and the Virgin Mary; itinerant evangelical preachers who threaten the authority of settled ministers; an actor whose performance actually satirized evangelical preachers; Millerites and Mormons (whose views have been summarized above); and the religiously-tinged but mostly political views of Seth Luther, long-time labor and suffrage agitator, whose only church affiliation, ironically, was with one of the "bourgeois" churches. Schantz tries to unify these disparate individuals and groups under the rubric of the "feminine"--their actions and beliefs tended to be disorderly, emotional, nonrational, and/or passive, even if they, themselves, were all men or were controlled by men. But somehow common sense tells me that Catholic Mary worshippers, Millerite millenarians, and anti-clerical actors do not all belong in the same culture camp. I also wonder how helpful gendered descriptions of behavior are when they are contradicted by the gender identity of those who were in control. (I know a lot of ex-Catholics who would hotly dispute the

notion that the patriarchal Church was ever a bastion of the feminine.) Schantz is more persuasive when he observes that disorderly, emotional, and passive behaviors were all dysfunctional or antithetical to the capitalist economy then booming in Providence.

These concerns and ruminations aside, Schantz has written a splendid local study that helps begin to answer the question, left hanging by Nathan Hatch: Who democratized American Christianity? Hatch told us much about the clerical leaders; now Schantz provides crucial information about the rank and file. The conclusion of his story, when the bourgeoisie consolidated control over Providence's religion, and the plebeian churches submitted to respectability, also suggests that perhaps the democratization of U.S. Christianity was rather short-lived. No historian of the early republic, or of religion in North America, will want to miss this thought-provoking, first-rate work.