



Thomas H. Olbricht, Hans Rollmann, eds. *The Quest for Christian Unity, Peace, and Purity in Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address: Text and Studies*. Lanham, Md. and London: Scarecrow Press, 2000. xxi + 489 pp. \$52.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8108-3843-7; \$78.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8108-3842-0.

Reviewed by William Atto (Department of History, University of Dallas)
Published on H-AmRel (October, 2002)



Thomas Campbell and the Cause of Christian Unity

Thomas Campbell and the Cause of Christian Unity

The proliferation of popular denominations in early nineteenth-century American Protestantism is one of the most salient features of American religious development in the antebellum era. An incredible number of new churches were formed, many of them offshoots of Presbyterianism and dedicated to the restoration of primitive Christian practices and beliefs and the unrestricted individual interpretation of Scripture. Their common objective was the establishment of a scripturally based faith that rejected extra-biblical practice as unnecessary, even immoral, accretions on the faith of the Apostles. These man-made traditions had to be purged before authentic Christianity could be restored. Among these reform movements were the "Christians," the Stonites, and the Campbellites (Disciples of Christ). The Campbellites initially coalesced around the leadership of Thomas Campbell (1763-1854), a Scotch-Irish immigrant to the United States in 1807. Although overshadowed by his son, Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), Thomas Campbell (hereafter Campbell) authored the *Declaration and Address* that was the founding document for the Campbellites and is the subject of *The Quest for Christian Unity, Peace, and Purity in Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address*.

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the impact of popular democracy in American religious life in the aftermath of the Revolution. The present work expands our

knowledge of that impact by a thorough consideration of one of the most influential documents to emerge from the period. What editors Thomas Ollbricht and Hans Rollman provide is a critical edition and exhaustive textual analysis of the *Declaration and Address* (hereafter *D&A*) combined with a whopping twenty scholarly essays by seventeen different authors considering various aspects of the *D&A*.

The great strengths of this work are its logical organization, its development, and its comprehensiveness. Beginning with a textual analysis and scripture index, the authors provide a valuable reference tool for future students of the *D&A*. Next, two essays examining the historical background to, and intellectual influence on, Campbell's work provide necessary context. This section is especially valuable as a link to the Reformation and as a means of placing Campbell in historical and theological context. Subsequent essays focus primarily upon Campbell's thought and include studies of his theology, eschatology, and soteriology as well as his use of scripture and biblical exegesis. The book concludes with four thought-provoking essays on the impact of Campbell and an assessment of his enduring influence today, as well as a bibliography of primary sources that will aid future researchers of the Restorationist Movement, the *D&A*, and the Campbellites.

Taken collectively, the essays provide a laudatory, though not altogether uncritical, evaluation of Camp-

bell's significance for the development of popular expressions of Christianity in antebellum America. Several of the studies contribute much to our understanding of Campbell's motives and impact on the Restoration Movement. Of particular importance is the late Hiram Lester's essay, "The Form and Function of the *Declaration and Address*," which demonstrates the ambiguity between the goals of the Christian Association of Washington, of which Campbell was a vital part, and the *D&A*, which stated the principle means to those goals (p.175). Ronald Grant Nutter's consideration of the *D&A* from a postmodern perspective is among the most critical and thought-provoking of the collection. Among the more dubious of Campbell's assumptions, to which Nutter rightly draws attention, is his exclusion of "any human interpretation" of scripture (p. 436). Scripture does not speak for itself but requires exegesis, however basic. Clearly Campbell understood as much and relied upon the authority of his own interpretations when necessary. That begs the question of legitimate authority and the unity of the Christian church, a topic taken up in Paul M. Blowers's essay. By examining the attempts of two Disciples, Frederick Doyle Kershner and William Robinson, to find a basis for Christian unity through Campbell's works, Blowers points up the great barriers to unity, even

among the descendants of the Stone-Campbell movement. His examination of Kershner and Robinson's assessment of Campbell's search for a halfway house "between the extremes of Protestantism and Catholicism" (p. 370) was intriguing and the issue merits a closer examination than it received, not only from the perspective of Kershner and Robinson, but from that of Campbell as well. For, despite the original intent to avoid increased denominationalism, the Campbellite Movement spawned its own church—the Disciples of Christ—and it would soon experience its own fractiousness and additional splintering, adding to the ever-increasing numbers of Protestant denominations on the American frontier.

The editors have assembled an impressive array of studies representing a variety of perspectives in order to assess the impact of Campbell's *D&A* on the elusive goal of Christian unity and its implications for the present. If not the final word on Campbell, it is unlikely we will see such a learned and comprehensive analysis of Campbell's works anytime soon. This work will serve as a basis for investigation into Campbell and the Disciples well into the future. Scholars interested in popular democracy and its effect on antebellum religion as well as Christian ecumenism will find much of value in this collection.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amrel>

Citation: William Atto. Review of Olbricht, Thomas H.; Rollmann, Hans, eds., *The Quest for Christian Unity, Peace, and Purity in Thomas Campbell's Declaration and Address: Text and Studies*. H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. October, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6800>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.