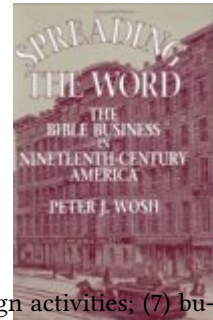


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter J. Wosh. *Spreading the Word: The Bible Business in Nineteenth-Century America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994. xii + 271 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-2928-6.

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Peter Wosh's book is a beautifully researched and well articulated book discussing the American Bible Society in terms of business history, institutional formation and philanthropic purpose. Wosh begins his analysis of the American Bible Society (ABS) by consolidating several self-published ABS anniversary histories. Wosh sees the ABS as an exemplar nineteenth-century institution that says much about the process of transforming institutions, the relationship of Protestantism to American capitalism, the conflict between large national enterprises and smaller, entrepreneurial firms accountable to localized interests, the continual definition of public culture and sense of community and the progress of religion and reform movements in a market economy. Wosh's book, a revision of his dissertation directed by Thomas Bender, bears the strong imprint of Bender's own work in this area. Bender's *Budapest and New York: Studies in Metropolitan Transformation; Community and Social Change in America; Community and Social Change in America; New York Intellect: A History of Intellectual Life in New York City; and Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in the Nineteenth-Century* all squarely address many of the themes in Wosh's own book. Readers of Bender's work in the field will find *Spreading the Word* most enlightening.

Wosh leverages his position as archivist of the ABS very effectively, using primary sources with extreme precision to construct a very readable and important narrative history. Answering his series of nested issues in a straight chronological fashion, Wosh uses nine chapters to trace a sequence of themes: (1) origins; (2) the transition from civic humanism to corporate benevolence; (3) the relationship between local particularism and national interests; (4) the limits of consensus in a capitalist metropolis, New York City; (5) the limits of consen-

sus in a Christian republic; (6) foreign activities; (7) bureaucratization; (8) Southern agencies; (9) expansion into the Levant. Throughout these chapters, Wosh does a fine job of linking the particular history of the ABS and its managers to important social sectors in the places where the organization conducts its business. In chapter four for instance, the ABS is seen within the context of the rise of mercantile fortunes. Together, mercantilists and religious philanthropists were interested in curbing the irreligion of the seamen laborers—the grist for both an expansionist capitalist labor system and reform movements. These “targets” of both moneyed interests and religious-based philanthropists engendered fierce competition among religious organizations (especially Roman Catholics). This chapter, which does such a fine job of maintaining the complex contortions of an institution committed to social change, is typical of the manner in which Wosh builds solid foundations for his examination of social fragmentation and heterogeneity.

Predictably, Wosh's analysis is often trained on the narrow confines of the ABS, whose mission was easier to realize in the world of family-dominated businesses of the late eighteenth-century. However, Wosh's narrative history of one institution goes far towards explaining religious discourse as a creolized form constituting a powerful model preserving real historical forms of cultural contact. The Bible as commodity, ethnic tensions and emergent corporate patterns of organization all enter into the “narrow” history of the ABS to produce a paradigm explaining the hybrid nature of both American society and American institutions. The ironic tenor of this transformation is reflected in Wosh's epilogue where he cites the example of Issac Bliss, prototypical “Gilded Age” administrator concerned with careerism, technological improvements, novel fundraising

techniques, grand building programs and bureaucratic principles confronted with a stingy corporate response to his request for more money to help him pay debts and medical bills incurred by himself and his son, Edward. Wosh's analysis, couched as it is in the personal tensions of an individual ABS manager, effectively maps the social transformation of the era onto the lives of its principals. Wosh's effort in *Spreading the Word* is both thoroughly

professional and engaging. This book is an important contribution to our understanding of institutional transformations in the nineteenth century.

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