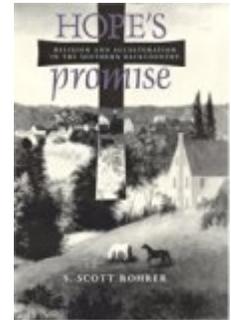


S. Scott Rohrer. *Hope's Promise: Religion and Acculturation in the Southern Backcountry.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. xxxiv + 266 pp. \$42.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8173-1435-4.



Reviewed by Mary Beth Mathews

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For too long, the Moravians have languished at the edge of American religious history. Like their cousins in the other "peace churches," the Moravians have been the subject of many fine monographs, but these books often struggle to make the denominations relevant to the history of religion in this country. Whether it is their German and Slavic roots or their own relative isolation from the larger Protestant culture, these groups have been relegated to the sidelines, as their Methodist and Baptist counterparts never have been.[1]

Thankfully, Scott Rohrer has found a reason to study the Moravians and show their experience in North Carolina as pertinent not just to scholars of Moravianism, but also to historians of the South and of American religious history. His book, *Hope's Promise: Religion and Acculturation in the Southern Backcountry*, provides a lens on this interesting group and their encounter with non-Moravian society and religion.

Using church records and personal accounts, and by examining both the larger farming communities that lay outside the strict authority of

the church, as well as the congregational towns, Rohrer has constructed a well-written and thoughtful portrait of some quintessentially "American" pioneers. He discusses the Moravian church movement in general and then moves on to show how Moravians came to this country in the eighteenth century and ended up in such disparate places as Maine and Maryland, not the usual pattern for German immigrants who often tended to live in Pennsylvania and then migrate down the Shenandoah Valley. Since this is America, some Moravians, like so many other groups, ventured further, with a significant number ending up in North Carolina. But in North Carolina, things were different. As Rohrer explains at the outset about the town of the book's title, "Hope was thus something quite interesting: an Anglo-American congregation of evangelicals residing in a predominately German-speaking enclave located along a predominately English-speaking frontier" (p. xix). The residents of Hope and the other Moravian communities in North Carolina came from English and German cultures, cultures which were quite different in their views of such practices as inheritance of land. The intermin-

gling of these groups in North Carolina produced interesting results, and the interaction of Moravians and non-Moravians, the acculturation as Rohrer refers to it, makes for even more interesting reading.

Rohrer has a gift for following his subjects both individually and as a group. For example, he trails Henrich Schor from Switzerland to Bethania, North Carolina, by way of Pennsylvania, North Carolina, back to Maryland, and down to North Carolina again (pp. 96-97). He finds wonderfully illustrative quotes from ministers who were concerned with the lack of German spoken by second and third generation members, yet who had no patience for the abolitionists who came to town (p. 184). And even though he shortchanges the description of heart religion (the Pietist notion that the converted should not just read the Bible, they should let the Bible penetrate their hearts and in so doing, every aspect of their lives) and equates evangelism with evangelicalism, Rohrer puts religion in the same place the Moravians would have--at the center of their lives. There is no functionalism in this work.

Rohrer divides his book into three parts to correspond with the varying stages of assimilation the North Carolinian Moravians underwent. The first stage he calls evangelism, and this stage helped to create a community of like-minded believers. The Moravians evangelized without regard to ethnicity and created a community in which religion, not national background, was "the most important glue in both creating a community and holding it together" (p. 86). The second stage, interaction with non-Moravians, at times ran concurrently with the first. In this process, Moravians, who were building their own community apart from non-believers, still maintained contacts with non-Moravians, and, as such, were influenced by non-Moravian culture. The final stage Rohrer documents is the point at which the Moravians began to lose their distinctiveness and

become, in Rohrer's words, "even more 'American' and 'southern'" (p. xxvii).

It is this last stage that makes the book's title more ambiguous. Clearly, the promise of Hope, and the other North Carolina settlements, was to live much as the first pilgrims in Massachusetts wanted to live, as shining cities on a hill, beacons for a fallen world, with the outlying farming communities providing evangelical outposts in the wilderness. Rohrer does a fine job of setting up this portion of the promise, and he correctly highlights the Moravians' lack of absolute isolation--how can you convert the unconverted if you are entirely apart from them? But the injunction to live as a Christian community was sorely tested when the Moravians began to own slaves, when they began to adopt the religious practices of outside groups, and when they began to change their interpretation of "heart religion." In dealing with this aspect of the promise, Rohrer needs to press harder. Why did Moravians "not see slavery as morally repugnant" (p. 162)? That Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf (the founder of the Moravian movement in Germany) found "the subordination of human beings ... [as] perfectly natural" and a brief discussion of the biblical justifications of slavery does not give us the entire picture (p. 161). All religions change over time, but Rohrer could expand more on the decisions of the southern Moravians and the promise they neglected. How could they be a beacon when they had become so much like their neighbors?

Ambiguous promise aside, Rohrer has made the case well that the surrounding culture influenced the Moravians much as it did their Methodist and Baptist cousins. His well-supported conclusions, that religion mattered more than ethnicity and that Moravians ended up very much like their neighbors, presents an interesting challenge to those scholars of American history who contend that regionalism is overrated. The argument is all the more interesting when you consider that Rohrer is building on ideas put forward

about the effect of the Revolutionary War on religion, and then giving them a regional twist.[2] As the colonies became a country in the late eighteenth century, their inhabitants altered their religious views to become more democratic, while they also became more regional. The Moravians of North Carolina and the Moravians of Pennsylvania both embraced the new evangelicalism, but they did so in very different, regional ways.

In all, Rohrer's work reads well, and his arguments are subtle and persuasive. By virtue of its lucid prose and vivid examples, the book lends itself to upper-level undergraduate courses. Rohrer has opened the door to more investigation of smaller religious groups in the South and their interaction with the larger culture.

Notes

[1]. For examples of works which have not received enough attention beyond the confines of Pietist scholarship, see Stephen B. Longenecker, *Piety and Tolerance: Pennsylvania German Religion, 1700-1850*, Pietist and Wesleyan Studies No. 6 (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994); Richard K. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683-1790*, The Mennonite Experience in America, Vol. 1 (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1985); and Elisabeth W. Sommer, *Serving Two Masters: Moravia Brethren in Germany and North Carolina, 1727-1801* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000).

[2]. See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); and Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1997).

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