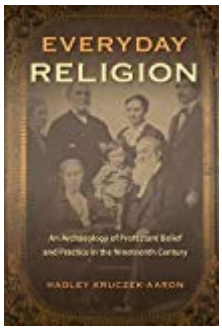
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Hadley Kruczek-Aaron. *Everyday Religion: An Archaeology of Protestant Belief and Practice in the Nineteenth Century.* Gainseville: University Press of Florida, 2015. 250 pp. $79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-6108-5.

Reviewed by Matthew Dougherty

Published on H-AmRel (July, 2016)

Commissioned by Bobby L. Smiley (Vanderbilt University)

Hadley Kruczek-Aaron's *Everyday Religion* is a valuable contribution to the history of antebellum reform movements. A historical archaeologist, Kruczek-Aaron uses both archeological and archival methods to study the community of Smithfield in Madison County, New York, and the household of Gerrit Smith (1797-1874), a prominent reformer and Perfectionist. Although he is now remembered as largely successful in making Smithfield a beacon of abolitionism and reform, Kruczek-Aaron shows that Smith struggled, and often failed, to bring his family and his community in line with his ideals. She argues that a full understanding of reform movements requires attention not just to the stated goals and publicized successes of reforming organizations, but also to the domestic spaces in which reformers fought, and often lost, daily battles for sanctity. Although *Everyday Religion* would have benefited from more engagement with the more recent historiographies of evangelicalism and reform in antebellum America, its blend of archival and archaeological sources suggests promising new avenues in the history of American religion.

The book opens with an overview of evangelical reform in the early nineteenth century, with particular attention paid to Christian Perfectionism. Perfectionists like Smith argued that it was possible for Protestants to achieve moral perfection after conversion. As a result, they expected the converted to make "Christian" choices when it came to the use of stimulants and alcohol, diet, dress, and everyday behavior. For Kruczek-Aaron's purposes, this makes Perfectionists ideal subjects of study, since what they saw as their successes or failures often left material traces. The presence in archeological sites of liquor bottles, overly fancy china, or pipe fragments, for example, suggests ways of living that Perfectionists would have frowned upon.

The heart of the book is a detailed analysis of archaeological dig sites around the Smith estate and Peterboro in the context of archival records. Smith attempted to use his considerable wealth

and influence to make his estate, the village of Peterboro, and, to a lesser extent

Smithfield, exemplars of reform. Contemporary visitors to the Smith estate, for the most part, seem to have taken his self-presentation at face value. Many commented on the family's ordered and harmonious life, as well as their adherence to quite strict Perfectionist principles despite their substantial wealth. Kruczek-Aaron demonstrates, however, that Smith was unable to enforce his principles to his liking even on his own estate. Domestic laborers in the Smith household, for example, seem to have frequently disobeyed his injunction against their using alcohol, and Kruczek-Aaron speculates that this may have had something to do with the unusually high turnover rate among the Smiths' staff members. Similarly, Smith's desire to project simplicity through choices about consumption was often at odds with the needs of maintaining a household befitting his family's station, as well as with the desires of his daughter, Elizabeth (herself a dress reformer).

Smith's influence in his wider community turns out also to have been limited. Temperance, anti-sectarianism, and abolition were all popular causes in Smithfield, but substantial resistance also existed. His wealth and conviction of his own moral purity made Smith some vocal enemies who appear in the documentary records, and Kruczek-Aaron's archaeological work reveals that even citizens too dependent on Smith to speak up against him in public defied him behind closed doors by consuming tobacco and alcohol. Kruczek-Aaron shows that the intensely local character of politics in this period made conflicts in the immediate community more salient than national issues. For example, despite the Smithfield area's fame as a hotbed of abolition, Smith and his Liberty Party made too many enemies and appeared to be too much against traditional male prerogatives—smoking and drinking among them—to garner support for their platform of women's rights and abolition.

Because Smith's estate is a National Historic Landmark, Kruczek-Aaron moves from her analysis to engage explicitly with the question of public history. How, she asks, ought we to present our evolving understanding of reform to the public in light of both historical and archaeological research? In a brief survey of the commemoration of reform movements in the northeastern United States, Kruczek-Aaron argues that the memorialization of abolition has eclipsed both other reform movements and resistance to reform movements in the public mind. She sharply critiques museums' characterizations of Gerrit Smith as a philanthropist who single-handedly created a town of abolitionists both as putting too much confidence in the power of one man to control his community and as ignoring the vital ways that financial dependence on Smith limited the ability of many community members to criticize his reform efforts.

Kruczek-Aaron's methodological arguments principally engage conversations within historical archaeology. As a result, she pays less attention to relevant historiographies in American religious history. Her references to works published in the last ten years are particularly sparse, leading to some misplaced characterizations of the historiography. She argues, for example, that her study "prompts a reconsideration of the taken-for-granted historical narratives surrounding religious reformers and reform in general" that portray prominent reformers as largely successful in exerting power on their communities (p. 13). It is difficult to tell if Kruczek-Aaron is referring to the "taken-for-granted narratives" of historians or of museums and historic sites. If the former, this would be surprising given strains in the historiography of American religion that, following on Jon Butler's ***Awash in a Sea of Faith*** (1990), have acknowledged the contested nature of religious reform in the early United States. David Hempton's ***Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*** (2005) and Amanda Porterfield's ***Conceived in Doubt*** (2012), to

name two more recent examples, have both portrayed reform as strongly contested.

It is particularly disappointing that Kruczek-Aaron does not engage with the field of material religion, apart from a passing reference to Colleen McDannell's *Material Christianity*, *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (1995). Engaging more with McDannell's work and with the continuing conversation on material religion in, for example, the works of David Morgan and S. Brent Plate as well as the pages of *Material Religion* might have opened Kruczek-Aaron's work to a historiography that deals more explicitly with material traces and artifacts than did the more textually focused scholars she cites. Because scholars of material religion employ a quite different set of methods from Kruczek-Aaron's archeological ones, engagement with them might also have produced valuable cross-fertilization. Despite these limitations in historiographic context, however, *Everyday Religion* moves the conversations on reform forward, and could profitably fit into courses or research projects focusing on antebellum evangelicalism, materiality, and reform in the United States.