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# The Historiography of the Second Great Awakening and the Problem of Historical Causation, 1945-2005

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*The Historiography of the Second Great Awakening and the Problem of Historical Causation,*

*1945-2005*

By

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Few historiographical debates have been as lively and enduring as those regarding the origins of the Second Great Awakening (SGA), which were the religious revivals that swept through the early American republic and forever transformed American culture. Prone to radical revision, this historiography suggests the difficulty in determining historical causation. This essay tracks that process of revision from 1945 to 2005, highlighting four central historiographic threads. The first thread, characterizing 1940s and 1950s scholarship, borrowed from Frederick Jackson Turner to interpret the SGA as a product of the unique features of the American frontier. The second thread, prominent in scholarship of the 1960s through the 1980s, understood the religious revivals as a means to assert social control amid disruptive social and economic changes. The third thread, reaching its height in the 1980s and 1990s, perceived the SGA as a democratic means to resist traditional sources of authority. Finally, the fourth thread, beginning in the 1990s, saw the SGA as a means of concentrating religious or social authority within expanding denominations.<sup>1</sup> Though these two most recent threads produced the most sophisticated and convincing interpretations of the SGA, future scholarship needs to aim at synthesis of these competing historiographies. Though it was a national phenomenon, the SGA varied extensively in its local and regional manifestations. A more nuanced interpretation of the SGA needs to consider the multiplicity of origins contributing to the revivals and how issues of social control, democratization, and denominational concentration interacted with and competed against one another in various contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> A nascent thread stressing the centrality of theology and ideas to the origins of the SGA is perceptible in the work of Mark Knoll (*America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)) and E. Brooks Holifield (*Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005)). These works are a departure from the four main threads dominating the field, which have explained the revivals as a result of social and economic conditions. The chronology of this essay, then, correlates with the four major threads in this historiography and the state of field at a moment when a new thread may be emerging.

The first major historiographic thread to attempt a systematic explanation of the origins of the SGA drew directly from Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis." In 1893, Turner, an obscure historian at the University of Wisconsin, presented a paper to a group of historians at the Chicago World's Fair entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Here he argued that Americans' unique experiences with the frontier shaped a distinctive American character and society. He described the frontier as a "free land" at the "meeting point between savagery and civilization," where Americans continually "return[ed] to primitive conditions" only to transform the wilderness into a civilized territory. "This perennial rebirth," he insisted, "furnish[ed] the forces dominating American character." Individualism and democracy were, for Turner, the two prominent features of American society. Away from the comforts and technologies of civilization, Turner described frontiersman as rugged individualists who survived through their own hard work and ingenuity. This frontier individualism produced "anti-social" behavior, but still "promoted democracy."<sup>2</sup>

This description of the frontier, though based more on myth than reality, dominated the historical discipline for half a century and formed the framework through which the first generation of historians explained the SGA. Since the SGA first began in the western territories of Kentucky and Tennessee, this first group of historians saw the unique conditions of the frontier as linked to the rise of evangelical religion. William Warren Sweet was one of the first historians to develop this interpretation with his *Revivalism in America* (1945) and later his *Religion in the Development of American Culture* (1952).<sup>3</sup> His interpretations dominated the historical landscape for the next

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) in *The American Intellectual Tradition*, vol. II, eds. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 55-59.

<sup>3</sup> William Warren Sweet, *Revivalism in America: Its Origin, Growth and Decline* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945); William Warren Sweet, *Religion in the Development of American Culture, 1765-1840* (Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1963). See also, William Warren Sweet, *The Methodists, a Collection of Source Materials*, Volume 4 (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964).

twenty or thirty years, and even those scholars who disagreed continued to see the revivals as an expression of frontier democracy.

One of Sweet's students, Charles A. Johnson, provides a clear example of the Turner-thesis-driven historiography in his monograph entitled *Frontier Camp Meeting* (1955).<sup>4</sup> Focusing on the first revivals on the Kentucky frontier at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Johnson attempted to explain why these revivals first occurred on the American frontier. His central argument was that the frontier was the birthplace of the SGA because of its unique historical conditions. Drawing directly from Turner, he described the frontier as individualistic, democratic, morally lax, and in need of an authority structure. These unique features, he contended, paved the way for and set the tone of the SGA.

Johnson first described the social need for religion on the frontier. He said that the frontier was a "moral desert," which "seemed to be coming apart at the seams." Away from the conventional forms of restraint from government, family, and church, men resorted to a pattern of "brawling, debauchery, and drunkenness." The disproportionate number of young men, the social isolation, and the focus on the bare necessities of life all contributed to this "uncivilized" society. Yet, Johnson insisted that these frontier settlements nevertheless "contained God-fearing men" who longed for social order as well as religious experience. When zealous missionaries and bold Methodist circuit riders made their way to the frontier, according to Johnson, they found a receptive audience.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See also Walter B. Posey, *Frontier Mission: a History of Religion West of the Southern Appalachians to 1861* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966). For books which revised the Turner-thesis-driven work but still operated within its framework, see Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950); Charles I. Foster, *Errand of Mercy: the Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960); and T. Scott Miyakawa, *Protestants and Pioneers: Individualism and Conformity of the American Frontier*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Charles A. Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting* (Dallas: Southern University Methodist Press, 1955), 8-13.

Though frontiersmen were ready to accept the social order, moral values, and religious experience that missionaries and circuit riders had to offer, Johnson argued that they were nevertheless active in shaping the character of their religious experiences. Johnson again drew directly from Turner in describing the frontiersmen as rugged individualists inclined towards egalitarianism and exhibiting a “bold nature in revolt of society’s restraints” as a result of the “leveling influence of poverty.” It is unsurprising, then, that the Methodist Episcopal Church, with its “democratic theology” stressing freedom of will and “instruction rather than castigation,” resonated with the individualism and egalitarianism of the pioneers.<sup>6</sup> The diverse peoples on the frontier, moreover, coupled with their proximity towards nature, made the camp meeting and its emotional fervor “ar[i]se logically out of the circumstances surrounding it.”<sup>7</sup> Johnson, then, linked the origins of the SGA to the unique conditions historical conditions of the frontier and the pioneers who inhabited it.

Though this interpretation has some merits, such as its plausible linkage with aspects of life on the frontier and religious revival, the historical discipline later experienced a tectonic shift which raised serious questions regarding this Turner-thesis-driven historiography. In the 1960s, the United States and much of the rest of the world were shaken by an incredible surge of grassroots reform movements, such as the American civil rights movement. The incredible potency of the global student movements, women’s movements, gay and lesbian movements, and civil rights movements cast doubt on the traditional approach to history, which emphasized elites and structural constraints as the principal determinants of continuity and change. Suddenly historians perceived that ordinary people, from slaves to factory workers, had agency in daily life and could be the principal drivers of historical change. Previous interpretations soon demanded revision, and new areas of inquiry warranted exploration. For example, historians’ neglect of the daily lives of

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<sup>6</sup> Charles A. Johnson, 13-18.

<sup>7</sup> Charles A. Johnson, 38.

African-Americans under slavery seemed appropriate when historians assumed that only elites made history and that slaves lacked any power. The civil rights movement, however, cast doubt on this assumption. Suddenly a new wave of social histories reexamined the lives of slaves and demonstrated how they did, in fact, have some control over their daily lives and how they were key actors in winning their own freedom.

This huge shift in the historical discipline facilitated scholarship that delegitimized Turner's romanticized notion of the frontier and much of the historiography of the SGA – like Johnson's – which rested upon its foundations. To be sure, Turner in some ways preempted and anticipated the new scholarship foregrounding novel historical actors. His writing revised earlier interpretations stressing the centrality of eastern elites in determining American politics and culture, pointing instead to western frontiersmen as the pillars of American society. Still, Turner's romantic descriptions of the American West and its inhabitants remained problematic. A new generation of historians, labeled the "New Western Historians," soon reinterpreted Turner's conception of the frontier as a bastion of individualism and democracy.<sup>8</sup> These historians emphasized how family and community were actually at the center of not only success, but survival, on the frontier.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the egalitarianism of frontier life appeared shallow amid the violent displacement and persecution of Native peoples. Whereas Turner described the West as "free land," subsequent historians revealed how the West was heavily populated with Indian tribes.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, while Turner conceived of westward expansion as unidirectional, New Western Historians described the complex and multiracial borderlands of the frontier to reveal the multidirectional character of the frontier. Therefore, while these points did not completely delegitimize Johnson's

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<sup>8</sup> The best example of this scholarship is Patricia Nelson Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> See John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Turner, "Significance of the Frontier," 55.

depiction of the frontier and, thus, his explanation for the SGA, they nevertheless cast serious doubt on the merits of this historiographic interpretation.

Another issue with the Turner-thesis-driven explanations of the SGA was their inability to explain how and why the revivals were a national phenomenon, affecting places very distant from the frontier, such as major cities like New York or Boston. The next major historiographic thread tackled this issue directly, as studies in the 1970s and 1980s often targeted regions in the Northeast. In line with the larger shift towards social history, this thread saw the religious revivals of the SGA as a means for marginalized, or self-perceived marginalized, people to assert social control. Again conceiving of the revivals as a product of earthly experiences rather than spiritual ones, this group of scholars explained religion's appeal through the disruptive nature of social and economic change. Most of these historians linked these changes to the Market Revolution, with its refashioning of the nature and organization of work, of social relations among classes and between the sexes, and of the political process.<sup>11</sup> These changes, according to this line of thinking, produced anxieties over marginalization which prompted people to reassert their authority through the apparatus of the church.

Paul E. Johnson's *A Shopkeeper's Millennium* is an important example of this historiography.<sup>12</sup> In this book, Johnson targeted Rochester, New York from 1815-37, insisting that it was a "center of both the religious and the social transformations" of this period.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, Rochester was not representative of most American towns and cities, but he maintained that

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<sup>11</sup> For the classic statement on the Market Revolution, see Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). For a recent book critiquing the idea of a "market revolution" during antebellum American, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> See also Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the City: the New York City Mission Movement, 1812-1870* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971); and Randolph A. Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), xiv.



it nevertheless embodied a dramatized example of the same processes occurring across the country. Discouraged by previous scholarship that provided only theoretical explanations for the causes of the SGA, Johnson sought to systematically test who “found comfort in revivals, and why.”<sup>14</sup> To accomplish this, he used a quantitative approach that analyzed “family structure, kinship relations, political conflict, occupational and geographic mobility, [and] patterns of association.”<sup>15</sup> Johnson scrutinized church records, city directories, tax lists, and newspapers in attempting this ambitious project. In this way, he sought to explain the origins of the SGA by examining the socioeconomic backgrounds of the people who participated in the revivals.

With this approach, Johnson argued that an emerging industrial bourgeoisie dominated the revivals in Rochester, finding in them a means to reassert their authority and resolve moral anxieties stemming from the Market Revolution. Johnson explained how the transformations of the Market Revolution spawned the development of two distinct cultures – working-class and middle-class. Suddenly the middle class moved into separate neighborhoods and distanced themselves at work, since producing for the market demanded different functions, like supervising and advertising, than did traditional manufacturing and artisanship. This separation, according to Johnson, produced a loss of status for the masters and manufacturers, as well as a loss of control over the behaviors of the working class. Significantly, masters assumed a moral responsibility for what they saw as a decline in working-class behavior, and they “experienced disobedience and disorder as religious problems.”<sup>16</sup> In Rochester, the elite’s political efforts to resolve these issues failed miserably, as the middle class became hopelessly divided over how to enforce moral behavior – coercion or persuasion. Therefore, the resentment over loss of status, the moral responsibility for causing the

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<sup>14</sup> Paul E. Johnson, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Paul E. Johnson, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Paul E. Johnson, 140.

disorder, and the inability of the government to resolve these conflicts paved the way for the religious revival of 1830-31, when Charles Finney visited.

Johnson argued that Rochester's middle class saw in evangelicalism a means to resolve their personal tensions and to once again dominate society. Finney's evangelical message insisted that each individual had the ability to determine his/her own salvation, emphasized the social nature of conversion and prayer, and stressed immediate activism to inspire conversion. These features resolved the political issue over coercion versus persuasion, as Finney declared that "authoritarian controls were not necessary," and the middle class then united into "an active and united missionary army."<sup>17</sup> Individual responsibility for salvation, moreover, alleviated the bourgeoisie's responsibility for continued working-class debauchery, such as excessive drinking. Finally, the united activism that the movement created provided an effective avenue to convert many of the working-class to middle-class norms and values. This turn to evangelicalism was not, according to Johnson, a conscious effort to dominate society. Rather, it just so happened to provide resolutions to issues that plagued the middle class with the transformations attending the Market Revolution.

This interpretation of the SGA suffers from a number of problems, some of which other scholars within this historiographic thread addressed. Most notably, Johnson almost entirely excluded the role of women in the revivals. When he did mention them, he said simply that "the evangelicals assigned crucial religious duties to wives and mothers."<sup>18</sup> Here he assumed "evangelicals" as men who designated responsibilities to passive women, when, in reality, women exhibited leadership over the entire revival phenomenon and consistently made up the majority of the congregants. Mary P. Ryan's *Cradle of the Middle Class*, as but one example, revised this

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<sup>17</sup> Paul E. Johnson, 140.

<sup>18</sup> Paul E. Johnson, 108.

interpretation by placing women at the center of the religious revivals.<sup>19</sup> For Ryan, middle-class women were the central agents of the SGA, as the social changes stemming from the Market Revolution created a separate, domestic sphere for middle-class women in which they had less public authority. Providing public religious and moral leadership, then, provided middle-class women an avenue to reassert the authority they perceived they had lost in the transition from a home-based to a market-based economy.

Other scholars within this school of historiography revised Johnson's overly-determinist interpretation. In *Religion and the Rise of the American City*, for instance, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg insisted that the guiding force for evangelical reform was more than simply a wanton attempt by the middle class to assert authority over lower classes. In examining city missions in New York City, she argued that "reformers desired both to save souls and to control social stress – but saw the two goals as essentially the same."<sup>20</sup> In other words, middle-class reformers genuinely wanted to save the souls of the unconverted at the same time that they wanted to retain secular authority. This interpretation departed from the conspiratorial nature of Johnson's argument and, therefore, provided a more sophisticated portrayal of the actions of middle-class evangelicals.

Still, the similarities far outweigh the differences within this historiographic thread. Randolph Roth's *The Democratic Dilemma* is a nice example of this. In his monograph, Roth similarly focused on one small area in the Northeast – the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont – and he claimed it was representative of the revivals of the SGA all across the country. He also perceived the revivals in Vermont as the product of a middle-class dilemma stemming from social changes in the antebellum era. Specifically, he argued that the middle class was anxious over "how to reconcile their commitment to competition, toleration, and popular sovereignty with their desire

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<sup>19</sup> Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the City*, 8.

to defend an orderly and pious way of life.”<sup>21</sup> For Roth, as for the other scholars in this historiographic thread, middle-class evangelicals resolved this dilemma by using the apparatus of the church to restrain democratic impulses and assert their own authority.

This social-control thread suffered from a number of problems. The most damning of these was that the social-control thesis was reductive of religious experience. While these scholars were right to examine the influence that changes in social status and power had on religious conversion, they were naïve to contend that phenomena as complex and contradictory as religious revivals can be explained primarily through these changes. Johnson’s language, characteristic of some monographs of the 1970s and 1980s that first utilized quantitative analysis, did not help. For instance, he made the grandiose claim that he could “systematically trace the social origins of revival religion.”<sup>22</sup> In the preface to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium* in 2004, he toned down this language in his admission that he would “make only the most modest effort to explain religious conversion in terms of [work relationships, family forms, and residential patterns].”<sup>23</sup> Yet, even this scaling down did not side-step the criticism that any interpretation of religious experience that attempts to explain it only through anxieties over social change ultimately is reductive of the great complexity that is religious experience.

The social-control historiography was also limited in its wider explanatory power. Many scholars of this generation, including Paul Johnson and Mary Ryan, narrowed the scope of their research to one major community. This made sense given their approach to quantify history, as such quantification becomes untenable for much larger regions. These historians then justified their selection of certain communities by claiming that they were representative of larger processes. Yet it was precisely this claim of representativeness that was problematic. Johnson justified his

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<sup>21</sup> Randolph A. Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Roth, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Roth, xix.

selection of Rochester, for instance, by declaring that it was a dramatic microcosm of the same economic transformations that were occurring across the country during the Market Revolution. He then uses evidence from this one community to explain the national phenomenon of the SGA. But how, then, could he explain why the SGA swept rural communities as well, which were very distant from economic transformations affecting cities like Rochester? How could he explain the birth of the SGA on the frontier? How could he explain that the SGA was a national phenomenon that affected communities of very different social and economic compositions? And, finally, if religious revival was tied to anxieties over social and economic changes that people experienced throughout the world, how could he explain that the SGA was a distinctively American phenomenon?

The next major historiographic thread had answers to these questions. The neoprogressive scholarship on the American Revolution directly influenced this generation of scholars. Due to the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, historians began to pay more attention to the social context of the Revolution. This led some scholars, such as Gordon Wood, to examine how the radical ideas of freedom and equality espoused by the elite took root in the American populace.<sup>24</sup> The neoprogressives, on the other hand, foregrounded the class conflict in Revolutionary-era society, and they paid attention to the grassroots activism of ordinary people fighting for equality. In this line of thinking, the American Revolution was a social revolution that transformed – from the bottom-up – a society of deference to one insistent on equality. For the neoprogressives, then, the American Revolution galvanized strong democratic impulses as well as a powerful opposition to traditional sources of authority within American society.<sup>25</sup>

This new conception of Revolutionary-era America as democratic and anti-authoritarian drove a new set of interpretations of the SGA. Suddenly historians paid attention to the mass appeal

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<sup>24</sup> See Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> John E. Hollitz, “Evaluating One Historian’s Argument: The ‘Other Side’ of the American Revolution,” in *Thinking Through the Past, Volume I: to 1877* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 57-59.

of the religious revivals as well as their central features, which often ran in the face of traditional liturgy and religious expression. Moreover, scholars began to reinterpret the democratic and egalitarian nature of much of the SGA, not as an expression of frontier democracy, but rather as a byproduct of the social revolution that swept the colonies during the Revolutionary war.

The most influential book of this historiographical thread was Nathan O. Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989).<sup>26</sup> Hatch adopted the neoprogressives' argument about the American Revolution, and he used it as a premise through which to understand the SGA. He proclaimed, "[t]he American Revolution is the most crucial event in American history" because it "dramatically expanded the circle of people who considered themselves capable of thinking for themselves." Moreover, he described how "[r]espect for authority, tradition, station, and education eroded," and "leaders could not survive" who refused to defer to the interests of the people. Hatch, therefore, saw the nature and extent of the SGA as an outgrowth of democratic populism, egalitarianism, and anti-authoritarianism stemming from the Revolution.<sup>27</sup>

Starting from this premise, Hatch organized his book around the theme of democratization. His central argument was that the "rise of evangelical Christianity in the early republic is... a story of the success of the common people in shaping the culture after their own priorities rather than the priorities outlined by gentleman." His focus, then, was on the SGA as a national phenomenon, rather than a regional or local one like Charles and Paul Johnson's books. He therefore emphasized the commonalities among religious revival across the country, which in his mind centered on the democratic impulse. In making his case, he examined five religious traditions or movements, including the Methodists, Baptists, Mormons, the black churches, and the Christian movement. He

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<sup>26</sup> See also Donald G. Mathews, "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830: An Hypothesis," *American Quarterly* 21 (Spring 1969): 23-43; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); John B. Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995); Paul K. Conkin, *Cane Ridge: America's Pentecost* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); and Jama Lazerow, *Religion and the Working Class in Antebellum America* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989), 3-7.

analyzed the written and verbal rhetoric as well as the non-traditional ecclesiastical methods of the leaders of these movements in order to demonstrate why these leaders were so popular. For instance, he pointed to the vernacular language of populist preachers like Elias Smith, Lorenzo Dow, and others who evinced a “course language, earthy humor, biting sarcasm, and commonsense reasoning” that appealed to the masses.<sup>28</sup> Hatch justified his focus on elites by arguing that the religious marketplace during this period was a largely open one where people flocked to the sects that matched their democratic impulses. Thus, the democratic dispositions of the masses were matched by an equally democratic competition among religious denominations for the patronage of the people.

Indeed, the numbers seemed to support Hatch’s claim, as the period from 1780-1830 witnessed a vast growth in radical denominations. The Methodist membership, for instance, doubled to 500,000 between 1820 and 1830. The Baptist membership increased tenfold in the first three decades of following the Revolution. The Mormons, Disciples of Christ, and other radical new sects soon dotted the religious landscape as well.<sup>29</sup> The fact that these were the denominations and sects that thrived during the SGA certainly suggested that they offered something unique and important to people at the time.

But how could historians be so sure that it was the democratic and anti-authoritarian inclinations of these denominations that made them so successful? Hatch himself conceded that “[t]he rise of popular sovereignty...often has involved insurgent leaders glorifying the many as a way to legitimate their own authority.”<sup>30</sup> One of the leaders of the Disciples of Christ, Alexander Campbell, for instance, spearheaded a decidedly undemocratic ecclesiastical structure despite his professed claims otherwise. Hatch addressed this by arguing that people’s hopes for a democratic

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<sup>28</sup> Hatch, 134-35.

<sup>29</sup> Hatch, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Hatch, 9.

upsurge, unfortunately, often took form in highly undemocratic ways. But the extent of these undemocratic forms may be more significant than Hatch contended. Perhaps Hatch borrowed too heavily from the neoproggressives in their insistence on the American Revolution as a social revolution, and this may have led him to overplay the centrality of the democratic impulse to the SGA.

Other historians who similarly interpreted revivalism as a democratic movement have focused on more specific regions. In *Religion in the Old South*, for instance, Donald Mathews explained revivalism in the South as an attempt by a “rising lower-middle / middle-class” to “reject as authoritative...the life-style and values of traditional elites.” For Mathews, evangelicalism was a “social process” through which middle-class Southerners, but also impoverished and oppressed groups of Southerners like slaves, resisted traditional authority and empowered themselves.<sup>31</sup> In *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky*, John Boles focused instead on the West. Harkening back to the frontier-thesis school of thought, Boles partly explained religious revival in Kentucky as a product of social and cultural conditions in the West. Specifically, he pointed to Kentuckians’ desires for a sense of community in a mobile and rapidly changing society, and he suggested a perceived lack of religiosity and a “climate of expectation.”<sup>32</sup> Even more, he stressed how revival religion was a “democratic faith that was profoundly comforting to most Kentuckians.”<sup>33</sup> For poorer, subsistence-level Kentuckians, according to Boles, evangelical religion not only leveled the playing field in heaven, but it also stressed the egalitarian nature of each individual in this world. In these ways, historians of this thread perceived revival religion as a democratic movement in its various regional manifestations.

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<sup>31</sup> Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, xv-xvii.

<sup>32</sup> John B. Boles, *Religion in Antebellum Kentucky*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Boles, 32.



Still other historians in line with this historical school stressed revivalism as a democratic process for particular groups. Jama Lazerow's *Religion and the Working Class in Antebellum America* is an important example of this historiography. In a direct refutation of interpretations like that in *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, which perceived working-class religiosity as little more than a source of disunity or a result of coercion by the middle class, Lazerow argued that working-class people actively used religion as a tool to fight against their oppression. For Lazerow, the workers "internalized their own version of the religion being employed to control them and used it to impose their own form of control."<sup>34</sup> This is but one example of how other scholars within this historical school interpreted revivalism as primarily a democratic movement employed by people of all socioeconomic conditions – from middle-class artisans to factory workers to slaves.

The great achievement of this historiographic thread portraying the revivals as democratic expressions was its accounting for the SGA as a national movement during the early American republic. Since the American Revolution affected the entire nation, using democratic expression as an analytic framework helped explain why the SGA occurred throughout the entire country. Indeed, when different sections of the country had very different social and economic conditions, the Revolution was an event – a transformative event – that plausibly transformed the entire nation. Moreover, this explanation helped explain why the SGA was a distinctly American phenomenon. While other Western nations experienced similar social and economic transformations from a burgeoning capitalist order, the American Revolution was uniquely American. Finally, this thread also explained the clearly egalitarian and anti-authoritarian impulses that Americans of all backgrounds exhibited during this period. The scholars of this historiographic thread have offered the best explanations for these facts.

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<sup>34</sup> Jama Lazerow, *Religion and the Working Class in Antebellum America*, 6.

Despite these achievements, in their attempts to explain the SGA as a national movement, the historians of this school downplayed unfairly the importance of local and regional differences. After all, although the SGA was indeed a national phenomenon, it did not affect each region or local community equally. In fact, powerful local and regional variations of the SGA persisted. Though some of these scholars did focus on specific regions, the framework of democratization predominated their thinking. As a consequence, they portrayed narrowly all of the regional and local revivals as the product of only a national democratic impulse. Other factors certainly contributed to these revivals, and these factors undoubtedly varied within their disparate contexts. Furthermore, though Americans clearly evinced democratic impulses during the SGA, might not the elite have continued to direct the impulses of the masses?

The fourth and final major historiographic thread was more sensitive to regional differences and critical of the democratization thesis. Emerging in the 1990s largely as a reaction to the democratization thread, this group of historians saw the revivals as a means of concentrating social or religious authority within expanding denominations. This questioning of the democratic underpinnings of the movement naturally led many historians to focus on the South, where hierarchy and rank continued to permeate society.

One example of this thread, which remains prominent today, is Christine Heyrman's *Southern Cross* (1997).<sup>35</sup> Focusing on the South from 1780-1830, Heyrman attempted to explain the origins of the Bible Belt and its unlikely turn to evangelicalism during the SGA. She described how evangelicalism in the eighteenth century "aroused [southerners'] sharpest fears" because it "struck at those hierarchies that lent stability to their daily lives: the deference of youth to age; the

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<sup>35</sup> See also Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); John Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Ellen Eslinger, *Citizens of Zion: The Social Origins of Camp Meeting Revivalism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999); and Amy DeRogatis, *Moral Geography: Maps, Missionaries, and the American Frontier* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

submission of children to parents and women to men; the loyalties of individuals to family and kin above any other group; and the rule of reserve over emotion within each person.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, the democratic nature of eighteenth-century evangelicalism that Hatch described struck fear into the hearts of southerners who saw this new radical religion as a threat to their social order. But, rather than infusing the South with egalitarianism, Heyrman showed how the radical nature of evangelicalism assured its marginalization in the eighteenth century. Heyrman, then, explained why evangelicalism took root in the nineteenth century when it was so marginal and threatening to “southern whites of all classes” only years before. She employed quantitative methods tracking membership within the various religious denominations, and she analyzed letters, sermons, speeches, pamphlets, and other materials to make sense of this transition.

Heyrman’s main contention was that the evangelicalism that did prosper in the South represented a sharp break with the more democratic and egalitarian nature of the movement in the eighteenth century. She contended that southern evangelicalism “was being reinvented during the very decades that it took root in that region, transformed by the demands of laymen and –women and the responses of clerical leaders.”<sup>37</sup> Her interpretation thus turned the democratization theory on its head: instead of evangelicalism transforming southern society by making it more democratic, southern society transformed evangelicalism by making it more conducive to hierarchy and order. Although these two processes certainly played off one another, the evidence she presented explained convincingly just how far evangelicalism changed in its southern manifestation. For example, she detailed how southern evangelicals adopted a more conciliatory stance towards the gentry and even “muted evangelical testimony against slavery.”<sup>38</sup> Yet more significantly, she showed how religious leaders went further by “altering, often drastically, many earlier evangelical

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<sup>36</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1997), 26.

<sup>37</sup> Heyrman, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Heyrman, 24.

teachings and practices concerning the proper roles of men and women, old and young, white and black, as well as their positions on the relationship between the church and the family.”<sup>39</sup> In these ways, she demonstrated how the nature of evangelicalism in the South adapted to the southern environment.

Heyrman explained this adaptation as a result of the actions of evangelical leaders in the South. She argued that these leaders “realized that the future of their churches” depended on significant alteration of evangelical teachings and practices.<sup>40</sup> These leaders then made the conscious decision to compromise some religious principles in order to assure their churches’ success. She identified these leaders as a “minority composed of clergy and laity who claimed that privilege by virtue of being white male heads of household.” It was these men, she continued, “who decided that the ultimate success of evangelicalism in the South lay in appealing to those who...esteemed maturity more than youth, put family before religious fellowship, upheld the superiority of white over black and of men over women, and prized honor above all else.”<sup>41</sup> A powerful and privileged few, then, according to Heyrman, spearheaded the revivals in the South along rather conservative and undemocratic lines.

This thread, though, has examined more than only the South, which clearly had a different culture. As a result of slavery and the South’s very different historical evolution, the South continued to be dominated by hierarchy and rank in a way that the North did not. Other historians showed how these same impulses to institutionalize denominations operated in other regions of the U.S. Stephen Marini in *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England*, for instance, argued that the institutionalization of radical denominations in New England explained religious growth in that region. Particularly, he explained how, in the 1780s, the Shakers, Universalists, and Freewill

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<sup>39</sup> Heyrman, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Heyrman, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Heyrman, 255-56.

Baptists all labored to develop coherent structures that could consolidate the chaotic inclinations of revival. Indeed, without a coherent structure, leaders of these revivals understood that their success could only be as fleeting as the religious fervor itself. As a result of this urge to consolidate, religious groups managed to successfully meld their radical and disparate beliefs into a cohesive denomination with an authority structure and concrete theological principles. It was, for Marini, precisely their success in consolidating into distinct denominations that fueled the religious revivals of the SGA. Because these radical denominations responded to the new social, economic, and material conditions of rural New England in the late eighteenth century, and because they did so in an institutionalized way that allowed them to proselytize effectively, these radical denominations gave impetus and form to the SGA.<sup>42</sup>

Still other books within this historiographic thread emphasized the national character of this process of denominational institutionalization. For example, in *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, Jon Butler argued that “[d]enominational institutions became the engine of national spiritual development.”<sup>43</sup> He contended that denominational authority expanded at the same time that the state’s authority in religion declined during the Revolutionary era. Though he admitted that Americans contested this new form of authority amid the democratic environment of the Revolution, he argued that the ultimate cause of the SGA was precisely the expansion of this new form of authority. Specifically, he attributed the incredible growth of national church denominations to their own initiative and effort. He pointed to each denomination’s appointment and regulation of itinerant ministers, publication of books and other print culture espousing its distinctiveness, and construction of sacred landscapes to argue that “congregations sprang up infrequently from lay initiative” and arose instead from “nurturing on the part of competing denominations.”<sup>44</sup> In this fashion, Butler and

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<sup>42</sup> Stephen A. Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England*.

<sup>43</sup> John Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 274.

<sup>44</sup> Butler, 274.

other historians of this thread contested Hatch's democratization thesis and instead emphasized the importance of the consolidation and institutionalization of competing denominations.

This latest historiographic thread remains prominent today for its ability to complicate the democratization theory. Instead of the SGA being solely a national movement that represented the onward march of democratization, egalitarianism, and anti-authoritarianism, this thread explains the important regional variations of the SGA. Moreover, this thread provides a more sophisticated interpretation of the local contexts through which Americans not only accepted or rejected, but also negotiated, contested, and compromised on religious ideas. Most importantly, this thread complicates the argument that "the people" were the primary determinants of the nature and course of revival religion. The historians of this thread revealed how elites – even though they were elites of radical denominations – continued to direct and shape the latent religious fervor within the populace. For this reason, scholarship stressing the ways in which the SGA was a product of expanding denominations attempting to consolidate control has been important in furthering our understanding of the revivals.

Nevertheless, future scholars should aim more at synthesis of these competing historiographies. The democratization thesis continues to provide the best broad conceptual framework. As the SGA was a national phenomenon imbued with democratic impulses stemming from the American Revolution, certainly this theory wields much explanatory power over a movement that was national and democratic in significant ways. Indeed, even if denominations played a more prominent role in the process than democratization scholars maintained, it remained the common people who ultimately shaped the message of the elites and chose to accept or reject each denomination's theology and authority. Yet historians must now be sensitive to the important local and regional variations of the SGA, and they must realize that different forces interacted with one another to give rise to the movement in different places. The democratization thesis, for

instance, simply did not operate in the same ways in the South as it did in the North. Moreover, in the city of Rochester where social and economic changes convulsed the town, it is likely true that social anxieties combined with but also played a more important role than democratic impulses in shaping the character and extent of the SGA. It is also plausible that similar anxieties infused the religious leadership of the various denominations and sects. An analysis that synthesizes anxieties over social control stemming from the Market Revolution and fears over religious control arising from denominational expansion is yet to be attempted. How might democratic impulses have informed and contested these competing anxieties over loss of control?

This advocacy of synthesis as a new direction for historical scholarship on the SGA stems from the realization that for too long these alternative interpretations have failed to benefit from one another's insights. Contrary to how many historians have approached the SGA, it is possible that the revivals evinced simultaneously authoritarian and anti-authoritarian impulses. Moreover, it is plausible that the frontier, the burgeoning urban environment, and the Deep South shared similar, yet distinct, contexts that facilitated revival. The task for the next generation of historians is to analyze the similarities within these contexts to further elucidate how the disparate impulses for social control, egalitarianism, religious control, and social order interacted to give shape and impetus to the SGA. Increasingly, historians will have to deal with the importance of theology and ideas in the revivals, as a new group of historians are reinterpreting American religious experience with theology at the center.<sup>45</sup> E. Brook Holifield's publication of *Theology in America* in 2005 embodies this nascent historiographic thread, which has the potential to move the field in new directions. Though ideas must be taken seriously, however, historians are right to continue to emphasize the social, economic, and political conditions in which people generated and adopted

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<sup>45</sup> See Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

those ideas. By utilizing a comparative framework sensitive to regional and local variations, historians of the next generation should be able to provide a more sophisticated interpretation of the SGA that does justice to the complex and contradictory phenomena that are religious revivals.



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