

New Light on Precisianist and Antinomian Puritanism

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The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638. By THEODORE DWIGHT BOZEMAN. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture. 368 pages. \$49.95 (cloth).

Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil War England. By DAVID R. COMO. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004. 520 pages. \$65.00 (cloth).

One remarkable providence of the year 2004 was the nearly simultaneous publication of two significant books on Puritanism in old and New England that explore overlapping themes in complementary ways. Theodore Dwight Bozeman builds on his definitive exposition of the movement's biblical restorationism, *To Live Ancient Lives*, with a magisterial study of how its precisianism—the drive for holy living and the godly reformation of church and society—awakened an antinomian reaction on both sides of the Atlantic.¹ David R. Como, meanwhile, revised his Princeton University dissertation into an impressively wide-ranging and provocative book describing the first wave of antinomian religious radicalism in England in the decades before 1640. Though neither author had the benefit of the other's completed book, the two studies were written in dialogue with one another. Bozeman, for example, toned down his thesis that antinomianism was a substantially different religious form (“post- and contra-puritan” [210]) in response to Como's critique in a journal article. In his text and in lengthy footnotes, Como engages material from Bozeman's book as it was published earlier in journals. Taken together these two volumes offer the clearest picture to date of the ways saints in old and New England embraced Puritan divinity in its mainstream and more radical manifestations.

These two books not only deepen scholars' knowledge of the multidimensional qualities of Puritanism but also contribute to the larger field of Atlantic studies in which developments in England and Europe and in the Americas are understood as unfolding within interrelated contexts. For example, though the intensity of New England's Antinomian Controversy has always been attributed in part to theological baggage from earlier episodes of radicalism in Reformation history, and Anne Hutchinson's Spirit-oriented religion has been linked with that of similar individuals and groups arising in the turbulent years of the English Civil War, both these studies demonstrate that she and her followers participated in an amorphous countermovement surging within or alongside Puritanism years before the Great Migration of the early 1630s and the Civil War of the 1640s. The hegemonic drive for moral and social reform that characterized mainstream Puritanism on both sides of the Atlantic—called disciplinary religion by Bozeman—inevitably sparked this antinomian backlash. The countermovement was epitomized by numerous charismatic figures, “none of whom,” as Como states, “can plausibly be mistaken for pillars of social or ideological stability” (441). That these essentially religious movements arose within widely varying contexts across an ocean illustrates the broad power of theological ideas and of spiritual yearning alongside whatever other social and economic forces were at work. Bozeman and Como put human faces on the transatlantic exchange of ideas, often with intriguing freshness—as in Como's section on the friendship and correspondence of John Winthrop Jr. and English Puritan-cum-antinomian Edward Howes.

¹ Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988).

Como argues that “antinomianism cannot be understood apart from the puritan community as a whole” (20). He sets as his historiographical task untangling the knot created a generation ago by Christopher Hill and Patrick Collinson. Identifying Puritans as members of an emergent, disciplined, middling-sort bourgeoisie, Hill described the radicals of the English Revolution as a movement separate and distinctive from Puritanism, with their own unique, and historically unverifiable, lineage from the Lollards to the Levellers. Collinson’s masterful illumination of the multilayered interpenetration of Puritanism and the pre-Laudian Church of England marginalized the radicals from the narrative. “If Hill’s work paradoxically stifled the further study of radical religion,” Como writes, “Collinson’s work dealt it an unambiguous death blow, leaving the roiling, sectarian enthusiasms of the 1640s mysterious and virtually unintelligible” (20). Together with Peter Lake, Como earlier probed beneath the surface of Collinson’s orderly Puritanism to describe a vibrant, disputatious Puritan underground. Within this “subterranean world of intra-puritan debate,” according to Como, there flourished an early-seventeenth-century “antinomian underground” that “served as a spawning ground for later forms of sectarian religiosity, both in terms of ideological content and personnel” (22–23). Based on close work with previously unexamined manuscripts and obscure printed sources, Como’s intricate narrative reveals the complex, variegated religious world of early Stuart England. Indeed, he argues that the early radicals and mainstream Puritans—and, hence, many in the established church—inhabited the same fractious religious world, for mainstream Puritan divinity with its emphasis on means of grace, sanctification, and anxiety over assurance of salvation provided the “negative referent” (29) against which radicals lived their Spirit-directed lives. Moreover, “even the most enthusiastic first-generation antinomians remained inextricably embedded in what might be called the cultural landscape of early Stuart puritanism” (29).

Both authors understand antinomianism as arising from “dissatisfaction with the strenuous, unforgiving nature of mainstream puritan piety” (37) among many devout seekers. Whereas Bozeman’s primary focus is on the orthodox side of the dialectic, Como devotes himself entirely to the detective work of uncovering and examining the minutiae of antinomian spiritual life, interpersonal relationships and influences, and communities. Distinguishing two main types among antinomians—inherentist perfectionists who looked to Hendrik Niclaes and his Family of Love for inspiration and imputative antinomians who held that freedom from sin depended on God’s grace in Christ’s atonement—Como recognizes that many individuals slid between the two and that only a fine line separates imputative antinomians from Puritan orthodoxy. He devotes a chapter, “Hybrid Forms of English Antinomianism,” to such and, whereas a provocative chapter titled “Ultra-Antinomianism” contains some of Como’s most exciting discoveries and conclusions, he admits that evidence for much out-and-out “mystical illuminism” in England is “slim, but extremely suggestive” (387–88). Full chapters on leading figures in England, including John Traske, John Eaton, John Everarde, Roger Brearley, and the “Grindletonians,” also contain rich detail on the women and men who followed them. The book’s central chapter is on London’s Antinomian Controversy that began in 1625 as “a series of acrimonious disputes between mainstream puritans and their antinomian opponents” and culminated in the early 1630s with “the full-scale suppression of antinomian ideas” (73–74) and the driving of the movement underground. Prior to this time of crisis under Charles I and Archbishop Laud, Como’s antinomians often moved with relative ease in and out of the Church of England, a phenomenon he fails to explain effectively. As late as 1628, for example, Grindletonian Roger Brearley and two colleagues were once again serving as curates of parishes. The lines between factions were all astonishingly porous through the 1620s. With Laud’s ascendancy, in a vain attempt at legitimization by distancing themselves from heresy, orthodox Puritans attacked antinomianism with vehemence and even joined forces with Laudian church leaders against them. The Caroline Church was uninterested in such distinctions among Puritans. Como concludes that under this pressure “the godly community stood ready to implode” (414), a collapse that occurred in

the 1640s, leaving in its wake civil war and sectarian proliferation.

The two books complement one another well in that, whereas Como merely sketches the Puritan practical divinity that was the context in which antinomianism arose in one chapter, Bozeman devotes almost two thirds of his study (nine chapters) to this subject. In part 3 of his book, on the antinomian backlash, Bozeman offers only one chapter on “John Eaton and the Antinomian First Wave” in England, followed by five chapters on John Cotton and New England’s Antinomian Controversy. The last 130 pages of *The Precisianist Strain* are virtually a monograph on John Cotton’s dangerous tightrope walk as pastor-theologian between orthodoxy and antinomianism. Certainly, Cotton came to exemplify the tensions within Puritanism that are the subject of both studies. Bozeman’s often stark portrayal of orthodox Puritan divinity clarifies why such a backlash was unavoidable. On one side no Puritan ever claimed that human deeds earned God’s grace or contributed to a salvation that could only be received as a free gift through faith alone. Simultaneously, however, Puritan practical divinity was “in unacknowledged league with centuries of Catholic teaching and practice” when it “constructed Christianity as a disciplinary system both severe and punctilious,” representing “the most intensive and largest-scale ascetic project in early modern Protestantism” (4). Many Puritans found that this theological ellipse with its two foci of faith and behavior offered a way of life that was strenuously holy and spiritually satisfying. Yet others, ironically, experienced in it the same sort of despair that young Luther had faced in Catholic monasticism. Antinomians thus were not enemies attacking from outside this system, but saints who found “the struggle too hard and the compensations too few” (7) and who sought a more blissful, spiritually immediate way to enjoy God.

Puritanism’s first phase as a disciplinary form of religion emerged in the late sixteenth century when the Presbyterian movement, in dialogue with Second Reformation theologians on the Continent, discovered the utility of covenant theology and what Bozeman calls “the Israelite paradigm” (32) in seeking to push the English Reformation forward. During these turbulent decades of social unrest, the vision of a thoroughgoing “reformation of manners” in all walks of life guided the saints. When it became clear by the 1590s that the Presbyterian goal of national reform of church and social structures was unattainable, the Puritan movement made a remarkable adjustment. Beginning with the ministry of Richard Greenham, saints redirected their efforts locally and inwardly. “If the national church was unreformable at present, the citizenry could be reached at personal and local levels” (65) through neighborhood devotional meetings, special Sabbath exercises, and more rigorous personal and family devotional disciplines. Bozeman notes that “within about two decades it evolved into a luxuriant spirituality without precedent or peer elsewhere in the Protestant world” (65). With Greenham’s parish at Dry Drayton as a model and large-scale printings of new devotional manuals by major writers such as William Perkins and John Preston as resources, the movement was gaining momentum by the turn of the seventeenth century. But, though Puritan practical divinity “stood on a bedrock of grace and faith alone,” Bozeman argues, in its devotionalism “it overlapped extensively with Catholic teaching, and its ruling emphasis was on behavior” (90). As Richard Sibbes and John Preston put it, “We find experience of the Grace of Christ, especially when we stir up ourselves to endeavour.’ ‘This . . . you are able to do,’ for God ‘makes you instruments’” (201).

The system had tension built into it. Puritan practical divinity required a personal conversion from sin to Christ; conversion was understood as the moral transformation of the self; conversion, linked with the doctrine of sanctification, was never complete in this life; meditative self-examination was prescribed as the best means to assess one’s spiritual progress; sin was so tenacious a fact of life that assurance of salvation was hard to come by and hypocrisy was easy to slip into. Once again Puritan pastor-theologians reprised Catholic practices by developing a sophisticated casuistry, the art of ministering to “cases of conscience” and counseling troubled saints on

discerning “signs and evidences of a good estate” (132). Ironically, the burden rested squarely on human effort—the work of examining one’s own behavior for indications of holiness. This “devotional re-Catholicization” (150), as Bozeman phrases it, even if normally softened in actual practice, set the stage for the same sort of reaction that moved Luther to seek a purely gracious God wholly apart from works. Like Como, Bozeman explains the radically Spirit-driven movement as a reaction from within orthodox Puritan practical divinity and piety. “Antinomian theorists might draw upon sources outside the Protestant mainline, but their prime objective was to unbind the solifidian gospel that the godly had lashed to a disciplinary program” (180). Despite tempering his language somewhat in response to Como’s earlier critique, Bozeman goes a bit further than Como in concluding that “the overall aim was, not to make limited adjustments, but to remake the faith as defined” (209) by Puritan orthodoxy.

Bozeman’s final cluster of chapters is a brilliant study of the life and thought of John Cotton. His close, experienced reading of Cotton’s works demonstrates that, prior to migrating to Boston, Cotton exemplified the Puritan devotional mainstream by emphasizing sanctification, a Catholic-like imitation of Christ, godly practices, and those behavioral “signes, by . . . which you may know, whether you have the Lord Jesus Christ or not” (219). Why, then, was Anne Hutchinson drawn to Cotton in England and why did Cotton support her more radical religious vision for as long as he did in Massachusetts? Bozeman identifies his emphasis on a direct dependence on Christ, the Holy Spirit’s role in assurance, and “the Protestant principle of private judgment” (223) in ways that encouraged a “relaxed spirituality in which the inner enjoyment of Christ stood above the active graces featured in the pietist regimen” (228). Once in New England, Cotton’s discernment of hypocrisy among many of the saints and of rising legalism among ministers and magistrates caused him to shift his weight theologically to the side of free grace—where the Hutchinsonians were busy creating an alternative religious party. One of Bozeman’s key texts, *Christ the Fountaine of Life* (published in 1651 but first delivered in the 1620s), suggests that, even in old England, Cotton held the two poles of spiritual immediacy and godly practice in such vital tension that even the slightest movement one way or the other would tip the balance. Cotton did not undergo the fundamental shift Bozeman describes so much as find himself in the untenable position of defending spiritual religion at a time when it was being taken to a dangerous extreme. With this understanding Cotton’s decisions during and after the Antinomian Controversy, including his abandonment of Hutchinson, did not entail the fundamental shift of theological position that Bozeman suggests. Bozeman tempers his argument by acknowledging that even during the rise of the Antinomian party, Cotton remained “ambivalent to a fault” (271) and always “hastened to enjoin caution” (278) in his congregation. If his theology had in fact been so mercurial, it would be hard to account for the speed with which he resumed his place of leadership in church and society.²

In his final chapter and in the epilogue, “Reflections,” Bozeman imagines the Antinomian Controversy’s influence extending far beyond adjustments within New England society during the balance of the seventeenth century to American culture’s perennial tendency toward “capitulation to sheer impulse and to carefree ease” (330). Whether or not Bozeman has in mind some future elaboration of his forward-looking closing reflections, both his book and Como’s add substantially to scholars’ comprehension of the early seventeenth-century transatlantic Puritan movement.

² See Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, “*Christ the Fountaine of Life* by John Cotton,” in *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic and Randall C. Gleason (Downers Gove, Ill., 2004).