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New York City’s late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century urban development facilitated the expansion of its churches but also limited their social influence. As a result, Kyle T. Bulthuis argues in this compelling book, New York City’s Episcopalians and Methodists were ultimately unsuccessful in their pursuit of Christian unity. While this study focuses on four important congregations and the chapels they controlled, it is much more than simply a history of these churches. Bulthuis provides an absorbing depiction of New York City during the early American Republic, including race, class, and gender relations, by focusing on the relationship of churches to the urban environment.

Bulthuis begins with the colonial origins of Trinity Anglican Church and John Street Methodist Chapel, stressing that “both groups aspired to a universal evangelism that would reach all members of society” (15), wealthy and poor, black and white. Trinity was incorporated in 1697, and the Methodists, who began as a reform movement within the Anglican Church, held public worship in New York City starting in 1767. The American Revolution temporarily diminished the influence of these churches, especially because they were identified with British loyalty. But the war’s challenges, and even postrevolutionary disestablishment, did not undermine the churches’ pursuit of an “organic vision of all society united in a coherent whole, with the wealthiest at the front” (52). During the 1790s, these churches prospered through a time of economic expansion, becoming “merchant congregations” (50), despite the fact that both continued to include parishioners with significant occupational diversity. Black worshippers, meanwhile, began attending chapels located further uptown from the primary church buildings and closer to the poorer neighborhoods of the city. While still part of Trinity Church, St. Paul’s Chapel allocated more seats to black worshippers than its “mother church” (65) did in the 1790s. St. Paul’s Chapel was dedicated in 1766. Situated six blocks north of Trinity Church and west of St. George’s Chapel, the location of St. Paul’s made Anglican worship more accessible to inhabitants of the expanding city. Its elegant Georgian-style architecture signified the prominence of New York Anglicans, and this status was reinforced when pews were reserved and decorated for President George Washington and the New York governor in 1789.

Slowly, growing numbers of black Methodists attended weekly segregated class meetings and worshipped at the African Methodist Episcopal...
Zion Chapel. With permission from white Methodist bishop Francis Asbury, black Methodists in 1796 began holding worship in a separate chapel, although some still attended the John Street Church too. Sunday Methodist worship services eventually divided along racial lines, but in these early years, “most blacks did not consider the separation to be an absolute break” (71). Rather, the benefit of Zion Chapel was that it allowed African Americans greater freedom to develop their spiritual and leadership gifts. They remained part of John Street Church until Zion Church was incorporated in 1801 and within the national Methodist denomination until their leaders formed the African Methodist Episcopal Zion denomination in 1821.

The 1810s and 1820s brought increased social conflict and schisms in churches, and economic recessions weakened them. A public pamphlet war erupted between Episcopalians John Henry Hobart and Cave Jones, which tended to divide parishioners along lines of gender and wealth. African American Methodists gradually moved toward independence as Zion incorporated itself and formed a separate denomination. The African American Episcopalians took a different path from the Methodists and began meeting on their own around 1809. Under the leadership of Peter Williams Jr., St. Philip’s Episcopal Church built a sanctuary in 1819 with the patronage of High Church Episcopalians at Trinity. By the 1840s the city’s expansion, and the proliferation of class-segregated neighborhoods, led each church to cater to ever-smaller subsets of the city’s population. All four churches tended to attract relatively wealthy congregants. In such a situation, “church leaders could not offer a united vision similar to what their forebears had in the Revolutionary era. Rather, they reached out to individuals on a case-by-case basis, offering not social transformation but personal salvation and public respectability” (11).

Church history is at its best when it embraces both social and cultural history methods, and Bulthuis’s book is exemplary in this regard. Bulthuis uses pewholder records, church membership lists, city directories, personal writings, sermons, and other sources to analyze the dominant characteristics of these churches and how they changed over time. He investigates the subtle ways in which women’s experiences differed from one congregation to another, offering a nuanced understanding of gendered religious experiences in the early Republic. All of these churches were led by men and had more female than male members, but women’s experiences of religion were anything but uniform across denominations. For example, Bulthuis argues that “the Episcopal Church built its parishes around the nuclear family and assumed patriarchal authority as normative. By contrast, Methodists viewed themselves as a new family. Old family ties broke when one heard the call to follow Christ, and all became brothers and sisters in faith” (77). Bulthuis shows that women at both Trinity and John Street often attended without husbands, but more women at John Street attended with other women.
Women such as Elizabeth Ann Seton and Mary Morgan Mason, used their religious status to participate in organizations that engaged with pressing issues in the urban environment, including benevolence, education, and evangelization. Some women were also “spiritually influential” (90) in these congregations. In black churches, leaders promoted “male middle-class respectability” (100) and racial unity in the face of growing white hostility, but “that vision also provided less space for black women’s leadership than did the white churches” (100). These leaders, such as Zion layman William Hamilton, also presumed to speak for the entire black community, many of whom were not churched and may not have uniformly supported the middle-class reform agenda.

Bulthuis provides reasonable explanations for his decision to focus on these four important congregations. In particular, examining only Anglican/Episcopal and Methodist churches allows their shared background and assumptions to provide a distinct context for understanding how these churches fractured along social lines. Thus, he is able to “measure what role revivals played in an urban setting; when, why, and how black churches split from white bodies; or how urban and economic growth (and decay) affected religious identities” (5). While this approach enables Bulthuis to explain distinctions in women’s and African Americans’ experiences in different churches, it limits his ability to make broader claims about religious groups in New York City or about religion in the early Republic. In a few instances Bulthuis makes claims about racial perceptions in other churches or in the city itself without enough evidence. He states that “the association of blacks with Anglicanism and Methodism hurt the churches’ public images in post-Revolutionary America” (42), but it is not clear what evidence is used to determine the public’s perceptions. “During the 1790s,” Bulthuis claims, “segregation allowed whites to keep their main meetings [Trinity and John Street] respectable in a society that increasingly found interracial contact suspicious” (66). However, Bulthuis does not prove that New York society overall or other churches found interracial contact questionable. In fact, it appears that other prominent city churches did not feel this way because during the 1780s and 1790s, New York City’s Dutch Reformed, First Baptist, and First Presbyterian churches all followed the examples of Trinity and John Street by baptizing and admitting increased numbers of African Americans.¹

An important strength of *Four Steeples* is its careful attention to divisions and diversity within the black community and African American

churches along lines of class, gender, and religion. For example, Bulthuis argues that “black Methodists increasingly disagreed over the level of connection to have with white Methodists” (100) and that “the creation of a black Methodist church in 1796 involved separation of not only black from white, but also black from black” (72). African Americans in this book practiced different religions (including no organized religion), but they also disagreed about matters such as reform movements and racial uplift.

In sum, Bulthuis provides an excellent case study that effectively uses multiple analytic approaches. *Four Steeples* joins a growing number of important studies that together show how race relations in churches varied by time and place in early America. From the mid-eighteenth century to the antebellum era, New York City was dramatically transformed. It went from one of many prosperous port towns in the British colonies to the premier metropolis in the United States. This transformation dramatically affected the city’s churches. Interracial, economically diverse congregations eventually became much more homogenous and less influential within the city as a whole. For the Episcopalians and Methodists, “religious life within the city became a form of cultural expression of public respectability but not of transformation” (171). *Four Steeples*, however, does transform the history of the early American Republic by making a strong case for paying attention to urban religious experiences.

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