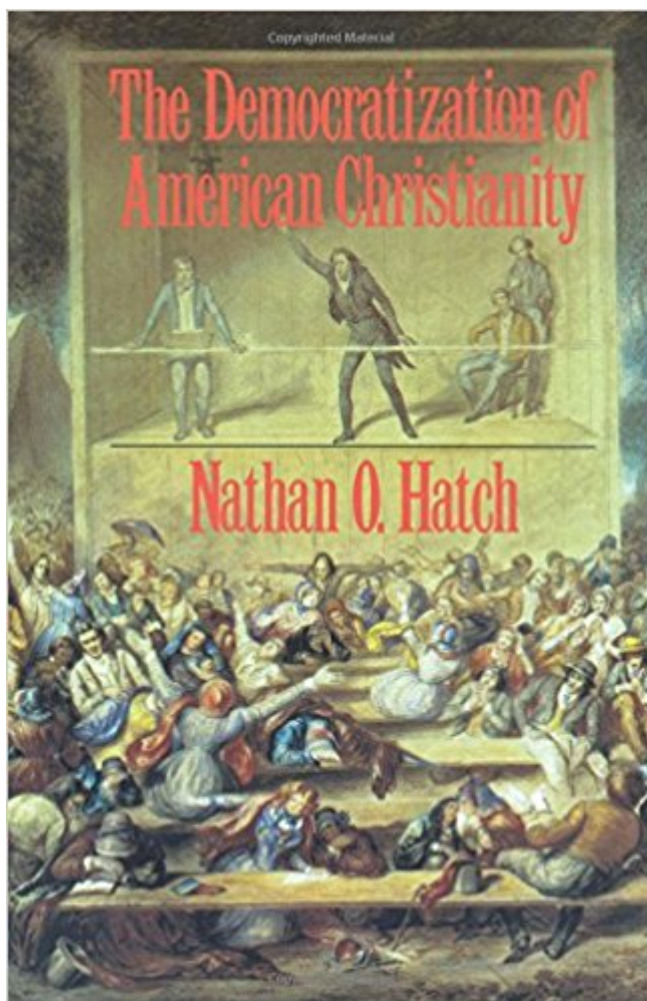


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# The Democratization Of American Christianity



## Synopsis

In this prize-winning book Nathan O. Hatch offers a provocative reassessment of religion and culture in the early days of the American republic, arguing that during this period American Christianity was democratized and common people became powerful actors on the religious scene. Hatch examines five distinct traditions or mass movements that emerged early in the nineteenth century—the Christian movement, Methodism, the Baptist movement, the black churches, and the Mormons—showing how all offered compelling visions of individual potential and collective aspiration to the unschooled and unsophisticated. "Rarely do works of scholarship deserve as much attention as this one. The so-called Second Great Awakening was the shaping epoch of American Protestantism, and this book is the most important study of it ever published." James Turner, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* "The most powerful, informed, and complex suggestion yet made about the religious, political, and psychic 'opening' of American life from Jefferson to Jackson. . . . Hatch's reconstruction of his five religious mass movements will add popular religious culture to denominationalism, church and state, and theology as primary dimensions of American religious history." Robert M. Calhoon, *William and Mary Quarterly* "Hatch's revisionist work asks us to put the religion of the early republic in a radically new perspective. . . . He has written one of the finest books on American religious history to appear in many years." James H. Moorhead, *Theology Today* The manuscript version of this book was awarded the 1988 Albert C. Outler Prize in Ecumenical Church History from the American Society of Church History Awarded the 1989 book prize of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic for the best book in the history of the early republic (1789-1850) Co-winner of the 1990 John Hope Franklin Publication Prize given by the American Studies Association for the best book in American Studies Nathan O. Hatch is professor of history and vice president for Graduate Studies and Research at the University of Notre Dame.

## Book Information

Paperback: 312 pages

Publisher: Yale University Press; Reprint edition (January 23, 1991)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0300050607

ISBN-13: 978-0300050608

Product Dimensions: 5.9 x 0.8 x 9.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 29 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #83,190 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #138 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > Colonial Period](#) #214 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > History](#) #405 in [Books > History > World > Religious > Christianity](#)

## Customer Reviews

Hatch examines the Christian movement, the Methodists, the Baptists, the black churches and the Mormons in early America to show how powerful influence was often exerted by common people, thanks to the democratization of religion. Copyright 1991 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

"Professor Hatch's amply documented study captures a wide range of the many-sided demands for equality and freedom that have characterized American Protestant Christianity, and the disdain for deference and patronage—nowhere more so than among black preachers. . . . The Democratization of American Christianity constitutes vital reading for those who would understand just what experience of the United States has done to Christian belief and practice."—Bryan Wilson, *Times Literary Supplement* "This study sheds important new light on early American social history. It extends a central theme that historians have used to explain political history into a new arena. It offers fresh ideas about the development of the evangelical movement that are important for all students of history to understand. In short, this book makes an important new contribution to social history."—Richard G. Miller, *History: Reviews of New Books* "Hatch provides an excellent account of the rise of democratically based, anti-elitist Protestant denominations in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America, linking them historically to the egalitarianism of Jeffersonian America. . . . This excellent study belongs in all academic libraries with serious American studies or religion collections. It is especially useful in providing guidance needed for further research, since many of the minor figures introduced by Hatch deserve full-length studies. Hatch deserves praise for a major effort!"—Library Journal "A superb treatment of Christianity during the volatile period of the early American Republic, which every student of American religious history must read, savor, and incorporate into his or her thinking of American religion and culture."—Timothy E. Fulop, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* "A standard reference on American religious history."—Michael Cromartie, *First Things* "Rarely do works of scholarship deserve as much attention as this one. The so-called Second Great Awakening was the shaping epoch of

American Protestantism, and this book is the most important study of it ever published. . . .

Hatch's account of the inner dynamic of American Protestantism is not merely plausible but compelling. We will never again look at the Second Great Awakening or at the history of religion in America with the same eyes." James Turner, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* "A seminal and revisionist book. . . . Hatch's paradigm has persuasive power because it seems to explain what is still happening in American religious life. . . . His book is . . . an important corrective to prevailing views and a marvelous impetus to further investigation." Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., *American Studies International* "This volume adds a crucial element to the narrative of the emergence of American culture after the revolution and, like all good revisions, should open the door to a new and necessary era of investigation." John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Journal of Religion* "Hatch's detailed analysis of the life of the churches during the formative years of the republic is on the whole thoroughly convincing." Winthrop S. Hudson, *Church History* "A landmark in the interpretation of early American religion. . . . His call to place populist religion at the center of the Second Great Awakening is categorically correct and long overdue. This volume provides a compelling new vision of religion in the early republic and invites scholars to a rich interpretive discourse certain to reshape its historiography." Stephen A. Marini, *American Historical Review* "Not only is Nathan O. Hatch's *Democratization of American Christianity* thoroughly researched and a pleasure to read, it is also one of the most important books on U. S. religious history to be published in the last decade. . . . The *Democratization of American Christianity* is a major achievement. Every teacher and student of early U. S. history will profit greatly from reading this splendid volume." Curtis D. Johnson, *The Historian* "This superbly written volume is an intellectual history. . . . This splendid book will surely be widely quoted and should be. It is a must-read for evangelicals and for all students of modern Christianity. As a classic, it will shape future discussion." David W. Hall, *Calvin Theological Journal* "[A] magnificent new history of democratic evangelicism in the New Republic." Robert M. Calhoon, *The Southern Friend*, *Journal of the North Carolina Friends Historical Society* "Nathan Hatch presents an excellent and provocative account of the triumph of popular religion in the antebellum republic. . . . Valuable material for students of nineteenth-century prose." J. Lawrence Brasher, *Nineteenth Century Prose* "Put this superb book on your must-read list. Nathan O. Hatch has written a fascinating, almost hagiographical history that seeks to canonize some forgotten or overlooked religious leaders who were immensely popular in early nineteenth-century America. Hatch's broad theme is

empowerment. He demonstrates beautifully through biography, social history, rhetorical analysis, the study of hymn lyrics and the history of thought how various Protestant movements in nineteenth-century America transformed largely powerless individuals into powerful religious leaders. The scope of his argument is extraordinary, his prose accessible, his theme vital. This is a relevant yet historically grounded work. . . . This timely history will challenge and enrich one's understanding of both past and present." •Jon Pahl, *The Christian Century* "This is the best book on religion in the early Republic that has ever been written." •Gordon S. Wood, Brown University "This deeply researched, superbly written book goes to the very heart of American religious and cultural development." •Jon Butler, Yale University

At the beginning of his book *The Democratization of American History*, Nathan Hatch makes his subject and purpose absolutely clear: "This book is about the cultural and religious history of the early American republic and the enduring structures of American Christianity. It argues both that the theme of democratization is central to understanding the development of American Christianity, and that the years of the early republic are the most crucial in revealing that process" (3). He says that his work focuses on "five distinct traditions, or mass movements, that developed early in the nineteenth century: the Christian movement, the Methodists, the Baptists, the black churches, and the Mormons" (4). He concludes that the expansion of conservative Protestantism in America "did not proceed primarily from the nimble response of religious elites meeting the challenge before them. Rather, Christianity was effectively reshaped by common people who molded it in their own image and who threw themselves into expanding its influence" (9). How did the popular religious movements of the early republic express a deeply democratic spirit? Hatch says they did it in three distinct ways. First, they swept away a couple aspects of tradition. They rejected the distinction between clergy and laity, nullifying the authority of religious elites. And, like the Jeffersonian Republicans, they "rejected the past as a repository of wisdom" (9-10). Second, these movements "empowered ordinary people by taking their deepest spiritual impulses at face value rather than subjecting them to the scrutiny of orthodox doctrine and the frowns of respectable clergymen" (10). Third, they believed "that a new age of religious and social harmony would naturally spring up out of their efforts to overthrow coercive and authoritarian structures" (10-11). But something else came along that these reformers and their movements did not expect: "The quest for unity that drove people to discard formal theology for the Scriptures drove them further asunder" (16). Consequently, ever since the time of the early republic a huge segment of American Christianity has been thoroughly-democratic and diverse. As the back cover of my copy relates, *The Democratization*

of American Christianity has won at least three impressive awards. Reading the book explains why. In an entertaining way, which includes many direct quotes from primary sources, Hatch helps the reader to see why American Christianity is not only vital but also incredibly diverse. He does a good job of making his case that the first forty years or so of the United States was such a critical time. I believe the weakest, most questionable part of the book is the "Epilogue," where Hatch moves forward in time. For example, his discussion of the rise and meaning of the Fundamentalist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries leaves something to be desired. He writes: "Even when Fundamentalists set out to defend the truth, their temptation was to rally large constituencies to the cause rather than to prepare for scholarly exchange. . . . It seemed more important to the project's backers to distribute three hundred thousand copies of *The Fundamentals* free of charge than to meet the liberals on their own ground in theological debate" (215). There is an element of truth in what Hatch says here. At the same time, it is worth pointing out that *The Fundamentals* were merely part of a significant quantity of distinctly-conservative literature, both popular and more-academic, that appeared around this time. During the last thirty years or so of the nineteenth century, for instance, both Charles A. Hodge and A.H. Strong produced traditional systematic theologies. James Orr guided the production of the original *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, of which the first edition appeared in 1915. Of course, most significant of all, between 1910 and 1915 a definitive series of twelve booklets entitled *The Fundamentals* was published and mailed to as many Christian leaders as possible in the United States, Canada, and England. And in 1923, the conservative Princeton professor J. Gresham Machen published his book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, which declared that the liberalism of the day and historic Christianity were essentially two different religions. These publications represent a formidable constellation of conservative literature. Significantly, they were produced in decades following the American Civil War, which had had the effect of breaking America's theological certainty and opening the door to newer philosophical, political, and religious trends. Such quibbling aside, it's important to point out that *The Democratization of American Christianity* is one of several books that always shows up on PhD reading lists in the field of American Religious History. This book is that significant.

Nathan Hatch, in his book, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, argues that "both that the theme of democratization is central to understanding the development of American Christianity, and that the years of the early republic are the most crucial in revealing that process." Hatch examines the democratizing effect of new, non-institutionalized religious groups, which he calls insurgents, including the Christian Movement, Francis

Asbury, Methodists, John Leland, Baptists, African-American churches, and the Mormons. While all five of these groups were as different from each other as they were to the more traditional mainstream religions, they all shared in a distrust of traditional authority and the belief that any layperson could interpret the Bible and the teachings of Jesus for themselves. Though many of these religious movements have either become mainstream on their own or joined with more respectable orders, they all represent the archetype from which all later evangelical American religious movements descended. Hatch divides his book into four sections: Context, Mass Movements, Audience, and Legacy. In the first, he outlines the manner in which the new religious movements represented Jeffersonian democratic ideas. Hatch writes, “They denied the age-old distinction that set the clergy apart as a separate order of men, the movements empowered ordinary people by taking their deepest spiritual impulses at face value, and the upsurge of democratic hope led to a welter of diverse and competing forms. In flaunting traditional authority and empowering their followers to examine their religious experiences for themselves, the new religions upheld the Jeffersonian ideals. In his second section, Hatch examines each of the five religious movements in detail, explaining how they fit his mold. The Christian Movement, for example, “was laced with the language of politics and espoused Jeffersonian values. Francis Asbury warned of the growing evil of preachers, elders, and bishops. John Leland echoed this when he confessed that his calling had been to watch and check clerical hierarchy, which assumes as many shades as a chameleon. African-American churches, by their very nature, rejected traditional white authority and allowed blacks to experience religion without white society controlling their experiences. Finally, the Mormon message “is intensely populist in its rejection of the religious conventions of [its] day and in its hostility to the orthodox clergy. In his third section, Hatch argues, “the insurgents considered people’s common sense more reliable, even in theology, than the judgement [sic] of an educated few. This concept led to an increase in the number of religious pamphlets and tracts written by untrained clergy or laypeople, allowing the public to have a voice in religion. Hatch concludes his book by arguing in his final section that modern evangelical Christianity in America is the result of this process that began in the nineteenth century. Hatch provides a compelling argument that insurgent religions, having adopted the populist language of Jeffersonian politics, redefined the American religious landscape. Moreover, he

demonstrates that the Second Great Awakening, rather than being the conservative religious movement that many historians have portrayed it to be, served to divorce religious leadership from social position, thereby ensuring the democratizing of American Christianity. Hatch admits in his post-epilogue section on the Second Great Awakening that there is more work remaining, but he lays out a solid foundation for future analyses to build upon.

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