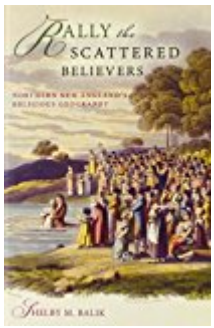
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Shelby M. Balik. *Rally the Scattered Believers: Northern New England's Religious Geography.* Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014. xv + 295 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-01210-4.



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Recently the dean of the humanities division at Yale, a literature scholar, made the case that we can't (and shouldn't try) to read everything that reaches print on a topic of interest.[1] According to her model, I read this book so you don't have to.

At first glance, this monograph does look as though it should fall into the "just tell me about the argument and the evidence" category. A revision of a doctoral dissertation, its title suggests that it will provide a limited commentary on the history of a relatively minor region. Indeed, we get no indication from the title even of the time period involved. Moreover, *Rally the Scattered Believers* is an undeniably slow read. The author meticulously grounds assertions in a wealth of evidence taken from what must have been a painstaking and lengthy research process. Moreover, it takes some prior knowledge in the history of religion in this region in the early American republic (the time period of the study) to sort out the denominational ingredients of the religious stew that was northern New England in the period following the Revolution.

But to judge the book by its cover would be a mistake. This work of scholarship is important, and it is unfortunate that Balik hasn't done a better job of signaling that up front. Whereas most histories of religion during the post-Revolutionary era continue to examine particular religious figures, denominations, or movements, this one relies on spatial geography to tell us a different story. What was happening to religious groups with respect to one another in a developing region during a time when the relationship between the religious and the civil spheres was anything but clear?

Why does what was happening then in the states north of Massachusetts matter? Because in Massachusetts and Connecticut, which used the north country as a safety valve for their impoverished and dispossessed sons and daughters, an established church stood at the center of community life, whether the majority of that community's

members were churched or no. (And a great many were not.) Long after the Bill of Rights decreed that Congress "shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," official state establishments endured far longer there than elsewhere—until 1818 in Connecticut, and until 1833 in Massachusetts. Religion in their northern offspring occupied a far more ambiguous position, however. Balik's story explores how "notions of boundaries, place and identity … developed [in northern New England] became the basis for spreading New England's deeply rooted spiritual culture, even as it opened the way to a new evangelical age" (back cover). Hers is, in other words, the story of how religious pluralism and a religious marketplace first developed in the decades following the Revolution in areas peopled by migrants heavily influenced by a church establishment but never fully committed to it.

Northern New England's would-be establishment never had the chance to develop the hegemonic presence Congregationalism had in the original colonies of Puritan settlement. Nor was the peopling of these areas necessarily a product of organized group exodus, bringing with it relative consensus on how to do things. Moreover, from the beginnings of white settlement, northern New England was missionary territory, even for Congregationalists, who placed a premium on gathered churches and settled ministers. New state governments in Vermont, New Hampshire, and later in Maine, all committed themselves to the principle of toleration, though what it would look like in practice was, in contrast to more Jeffersonian states such as Virginia, very much a matter of trial and error. Despite nominal disestablishment, continuing expectations existed in many places that citizens would pay their fair share via taxes to support some sort of town religion. Competition was present from the first to determine which group—which fledgling denomination—might receive tax monies not only from its own adherents, but also from the unchurched and indifferent. In fact, Congregationalists usually won the battle of who controlled the town meeting house and hired the settled minister. But over time, they usually lost the war for clear dominance, as the law and the courts moved toward the position that religious toleration meant not only the right to worship as one liked, but the right without penalty not to worship at all, if one chose.

In part, the resolution of this unstable situation, which took two to three generations to achieve, hinged on the fact that in a poorly settled country peopled by poor people, those practices most successful in drawing new members, namely revivals, class meetings, and the cultivation of personal piety through print, became common to all Protestant religious groups competing for adherents. Theology (and, one suspects, social standing) became the major marker separating one denomination from another. Moreover, in a region where spiritual resources remained scarce for a very long time, cooperation among erstwhile competing groups was often very much in evidence, further blurring the lines between them. Multiple denominations coexisting in a single geographical area added up to something more than the sum of their parts.

By the time the new republic was half a century old, the infrastructure of religious diversity stabilized around denominational structures anchored in particular towns, a compromise between the old community-based territorial churches and a newer democratizing ethos centered around poll parishes. Lest we believe that these new churches were completely a result of power devolving upon the people, however, Balik reminds us that the scattered churches of particular denominations were nearly always brought together by umbrella associations that provided insurance of appropriate governance, purity of doctrine, and relative homogeneity of belief despite the growing number of choices the religious marketplace provided. Though town churches were

no more, churches in towns gathered together under separate denominational umbrellas continued to feel the impact of top-down discipline.

Was it the assumption of these states and locales in which the new religious marketplace flourished that they were by nature Christian and that civil society was undergirded by explicitly Christian values? In a cultural sense, you betcha—though there were limits. The Protestant churches that existed side by side, inculcating in different ways the moral stuff of good citizenship if not godliness, were the backbone of the republic, despite the fact that no one group now reigned over a religious establishment.

Though the vast majority of the population remained formally unchurched, communities maintained an implicit sense that the practices of evangelical Protestant Christianity would promulgate the values that undergirded a loose civic identity. Until the time came when they no longer did.

The latter would be a topic for another book. In the meantime, you might want to read this one to understand better what the halting progress toward the wall between church and state looked like in one region that turns out to have been important after all.

Note

[1]. Amy Hungerford, "On Not Reading," ***The Chronicle of Higher Education***, September 11, 2016, http://www.chronicle.com/article/On-Refusing-to-Read/237717?cid=trend_right_t.