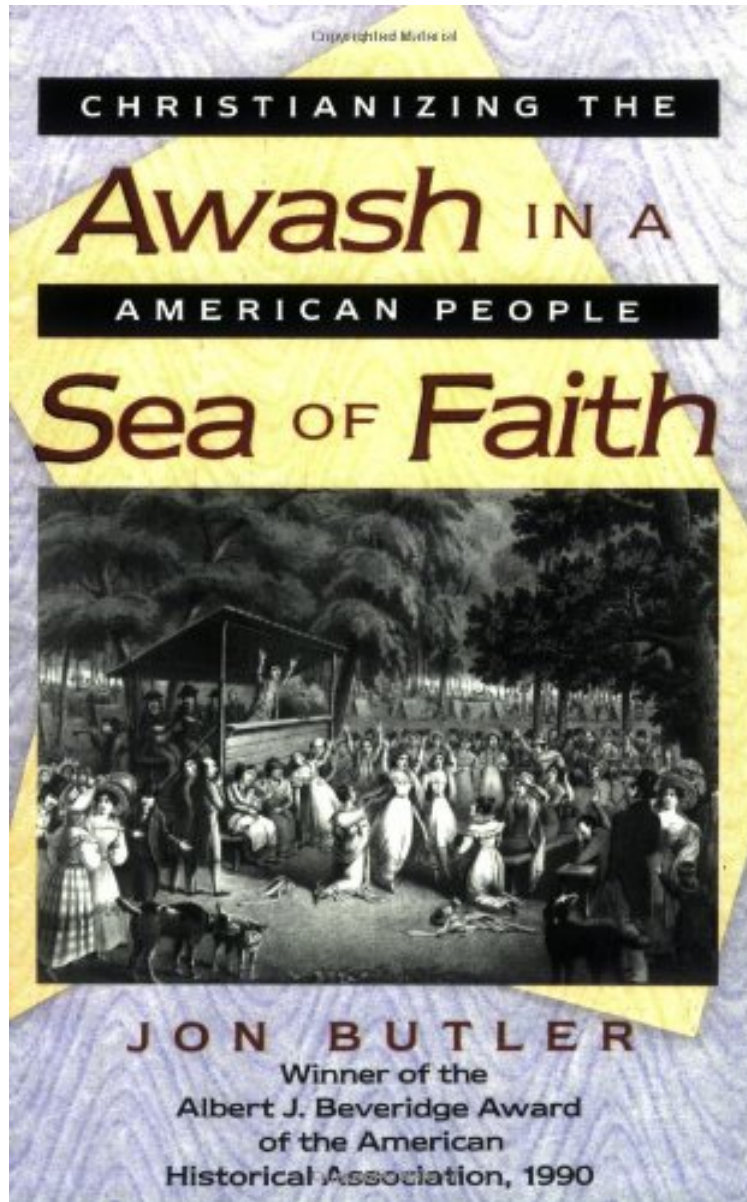


Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People (Studies in Cultural History)

Jon Butler

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Jon Butler : Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People (Studies in Cultural History) before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People (Studies in Cultural History):

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. A Different Perspective on Religion in Early America By Craig Stephans Butler provides a historical view of American religion that attaches less importance to Puritanism as the major force in shaping the nation's religion. He emphasizes the influence of the role of authoritarian and coercive religious practices that established and advanced religious causes in America. Additionally, Butler follows the emergence of a religious eclecticism throughout the colonies. The movement of religious influence was confluent with political and economic developments to shape the colonies. The state-church religion that primarily shaped 17th and 18th century colonial America held power based on its coercion, territoriality and public ceremonialism. He asserts that the religion of the colonists originated primarily in Europe and is incomprehensible apart from understanding its European influences. Paradoxically, Butler writes that the most enduring patterns of American religion were also created and not merely inherited. Butler's chapters make the points that religious practice was not an organic evolution in the colonies. The governments were actively involved in dictating religious practices of their citizens. Dissenting beliefs and behavior were not welcome to the early colonies with the exception of Rhode Island and Pennsylvania which adopted more lenient libertine laws concerning religion. Religious practice was not standard throughout the colonies nor was it universal among the residents of the colonies. Butler also elaborates on the presence of magic and the occult in the New World of North America. Christians were militant against non-Christian spirituality, occult or magic. These were deemed to occur through diabolical means and were treated as such by the young governments and were later dismissed by children of the Enlightenment. Butler's treatment of religion and slavery reveals the contradicting tension between the doctrines of Christianity and the practice of slavery. Religion was central to the argument for or against slavery. The practices of religion in the slaveholding colonies had to deal with whether to evangelize and educate the slaves and then whether to allow whites and blacks to worship together. Butler discusses the ways that whites manipulated the Scriptures to accommodate slavery. He illustrates the effect that the slavery argument had on compromising the Christian integrity of churches, as they defended and facilitated slavery. American revivalism was not a single denominational movement that sparked Christianity in the colonies. It was but another stream of religion besides the state church tradition of the establishmentarian Anglican and Congregationalists traditions. The American Revolution brought a shift in the religious landscape as Anglican ministers who supported the crown fled and as a new patriotism competed with religion or merged with it. Following the Revolution, American church leaders renewed efforts to stamp Christian values on a new independent society as a priority for the success of the infant republic. The religious laws in Virginia illustrate Butler's thesis that religion in the colonies was initially a government sponsored institution. This is not the religious freedom one usually associates with the New World. In the 1670's it was the church-state alliance that provided the stability and authority of the Anglican Church in Virginia. The Virginia Assembly mandated Anglican churches in every county and dictated the processes for vestry elections and taxation on behalf of the church. As a result, Anglican churches, benefiting from compulsory taxes, accounted for every one of the colony's new churches constructed between 1680 and 1720. What also becomes apparent in Butler's writing is that it was the Deist language of the Declaration of Independence that laid the foundation of religious freedom in the United States rather than the influence of the various Christian movements. It was the secular Revolution and not the religious ties of the colonists that bound the colonies together. Butler argues against historians' claims that evangelicalism was behind the sentiments and boldness behind the revolution. He claims that the Declaration of Independence provides clear-cut evidence of the secondary and supportive role that religion and Christianity played in creating and solidifying the revolutionary struggle. In the latter chapters of his book, Butler describes the religious movements that largely resemble what we see in the United States today. Following the American Revolution, the acts of the new country allowed for religious freedom and expression. This freedom from coercion and establishment led to new denominations and even new religions like Unitarianism and Mormonism springing up. Butler points out a new syncretism between popular supernaturalism and Christianity. The interest in spiritualism and desire for supernatural experience led to the popularity of groups like the Swedenborgs, Freemasons, Mesmerists and other spiritualists. Butler highlights four institutional expressions of the religious climate of the new country. These were Methodism, Mormonism, Afro-American Christianity and spiritualism. Butler asserts that region, class and race all constrained the religious tendencies of Americans. Butler also asserts that denominations gained adherents through coercion and authority. He suggests that denominations "manipulated" systems of denominational meetings to further establish power and influence. Denominations shaped evangelization and the development of new congregations, often through the use of the itinerant preacher. According to Butler, denominations used books and publications to influence and expand authority. Butler also points to a plethora of reform societies and mostly Christian colleges as contributing to the influence of religion on the society. He assigns a coercive nature to the reform societies that also used print publication to gain audiences and influence. According to Butler, immigrants and indigenous groups contributed greatly to the religious pluralism of the country. This change along with religious renewal, revival and schism brought forth hosts of new groups and new worshippers to the landscape. For Butler, coercion is the main ingredient of American religious tradition. He seems to think the Christian history is void of God-initiated or lay-initiated growth. This might seem a harsh assessment of his perspective, but I conclude that it is only the censored spiritual movements like occult, voodoo, African rituals and natural theology that Butler thinks are "grass-root"

developments. Actual growth of Christianity is due to institutional-hierarchical manipulation and coercion. Even his treatment of the development of Black churches is clouded by Butler's assertion that these were havens of African pagan-ritual as much as Christianity. The expansion of Christianity westward seems to be deemed nothing better than an entrepreneurial movement to claim new markets; the idea of the Christian desire for evangelization for the sake of saving the lost seems foreign to Butler's historical assessment. His concluding treatment of Abraham Lincoln is indicative of his worldview revealed in this book. Lincoln could not possibly have been a sincere Christian; after all, look at what he said here or there. Butler's book does open a new window to the religious history of American. I think he fails to look into the heart of Christianity in general but sees it from the outside and judges it according to his own worldview and inclinations. His willingness to assess the history from a view other than the normal chronological path is helpful to see the patterns of religious growth and transformations. His book definitely provides me with a more elucidated perspective of our pluralistic landscape today. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Four Stars By Shaun Good book, forced to read, kinda boring. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Walker Very helpful for my research. Insightful.

Challenging the formidable tradition that places early New England Puritanism at the center of the American religious experience, Yale historian Jon Butler offers a new interpretation of three hundred years of religious and cultural development. Butler stresses the instability of religion in Europe where state churches battled dissenters, magic, and astonishingly low church participation. He charts the transfer of these difficulties to America, including the failure of Puritan religious models, and describes the surprising advance of religious commitment there between 1700 and 1865. Through the assertion of authority and coercion, a remarkable sacralization of the prerevolutionary countryside, advancing religious pluralism, the folklorization of magic, and an eclectic, syncretistic emphasis on supernatural interventionism, including miracles, America emerged after 1800 as an extraordinary spiritual hothouse that far eclipsed the Puritan achievement even as secularism triumphed in Europe. *A Wash in a Sea of Faith* ranges from popular piety to magic, from anxious revolutionary war chaplains to the cool rationalism of James Madison, from divining rods and seer stones to Anglican and Unitarian elites, and from Virginia Anglican occultists and Presbyterians raised from the dead to Jonathan Edwards, Joseph Smith, and Abraham Lincoln. Butler deftly comes to terms with conventional themes such as Puritanism, witchcraft, religion and revolution, revivalism, millenarianism, and Mormonism. His elucidation of Christianity's powerful role in shaping slavery and of a subsequent African spiritual holocaust, with its ironic result in African Christianization, is an especially fresh and incisive account. *A Wash in a Sea of Faith* reveals the proliferation of American religious expression not its decline and stresses the creative tensions between pulpit and pew across three hundred years of social maturation. Striking in its breadth and deeply rooted in primary sources, this seminal book recasts the landscape of American religious and cultural history.

From *Library Journal* Butler's fine scholarly summary of the first three centuries of Christian experience in America is both well researched and very readable. Butler ranges widely, showing how the elitist Christianity of early modern Europe co-existed with belief in magic and the occult and also discussing 18th-century church establishment in America, the negligible impact of the Great Awakening, the impact of the American Revolution on religion, and the democratization of 19th-century American religion. While many of his theses are arguable, they are all impressively defended. Recommended for large public and academic libraries. - Susan A. Stussy, St. Norbert Coll., De Pere, Wis. Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc. Throughout, the richness of detail, nuance, and illustration is superb and often eye-opening...In all, it is a daring work of synthesis...meticulously researched...This book ranks among the most challenging and far-ranging historical analyses of religion in America to date. (Leigh Eric Schmidt *Journal of Church and State*) This is one of those rare books that historians await impatiently for years. It is also one of those rare and remarkable books that prove worth the wait. It fulfills extravagantly the promise of those pathbreaking and pugnacious articles that made magic an essential reality of the seventeenth century and the Great Awakening an interpretive fiction of the eighteenth. It is, by far, the best account we have of early American religious life, and the most radiantly original. (Michael Zuckerman *Journal of the Early Republic*) Anyone who wants to know about religion in America up to the Civil War would do well to read Jon Butler's rich, comprehensive and--it must be said--contentious account. (David Martin *Times Literary Supplement*) About the Author Jon Butler is William Robertson Coe Professor of American Studies and History, and Professor of Religious Studies, at Yale University.