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Review by: William Breitenbach
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Children of Wrath: New School Calvinism and Antebellum Reform.

By Leo P. Hirrel. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky. 1998. Pp. x, 248. \$39.95.)

In *Children of Wrath*, Leo Hirrel explores the connections between New School Calvinism in the Congregational and Presbyterian churches and certain antebellum reforms: sabbatarianism, anti-Catholicism, temperance, antislavery, and the missionary activities sponsored by the so-called benevolent empire. The first half of the book describes how New School Calvinism emerged out of the Edwardsian theological tradition as the Yale theology professor Nathaniel William Taylor and his followers tried to defend Calvinism against Deist and Unitarian objections to its unfairness. Taylor's New Haven Theology, as the New School ideas were originally called, retained the traditional Calvinist concepts of depravity and grace but restated them so that God became a moral governor whose accountable human subjects had the ability to embrace the truths He presented to them as motives. The result was a defensible Calvinism, one that was "completely compatible with human standards of reason, morality, and justice" (p. 28). So serviceable was the New Haven theology that it quickly spread during the 1830s through New England Congregationalism and, courtesy of a program of denominational cooperation known as the Plan of Union, into Presbyterianism, where it eventually won the allegiance of nearly 50 percent of the clergy.

In the second half of the book, Hirrel attempts to link the theology of the New School to the rhetoric used by New School clergymen who participated in the aforementioned reform movements. In each of the chapters on reform, the basic pattern of his argument is this: New School reformers assumed that under God's moral government there were universal, fixed, self-evident, objective truths, which when presented to erring moral agents should and could be obeyed. The task of the reformer was to present those truths, hoping that moral suasion would cure the sinner and eradicate the sin but knowing that human depravity would prompt some sinners to conspire to suppress the truth, protect the sin, resist the reformers, and prevent the millennial triumph of the redeemer nation. According to Hirrel, New School theology made for a style of reform that was uncompromising and apocalyptic, that saw social problems as battles between the forces of sin and the forces of holiness, and that easily credited tales of conspiracies and atrocities perpetrated by the sabbath-breakers, Roman Catholics, rum-sellers, and slaveholders who were the targets of their

reforming zeal. In short, Hirrel declares, these were *religious* reformers of a distinctly nineteenth-century variety, not "precursors to modern liberalism" (p. 6).

The idea of analyzing the relationship between Calvinist theology and antebellum reform is a good one, but Hirrel's attempt to do it is not entirely successful. First of all, the book's treatment of both religion and reform seems curiously dated. Although recent works have been read, cited, and occasionally used, the historiographical conceptualization differs little from what prevailed twenty years ago. Thus, it is the Jonathan Edwards of Perry Miller and Joseph Haroutunian who appears, not the Edwards of Norman Fiering and Allen Guelzo. And the debate over reform seems not to have advanced much beyond the days when Clifford S. Griffin's social control thesis was matched against John L. Thomas's notion of romantic perfectionism.

Second, Hirrel is not crystal clear about the exact nature of the relationship between theology and reform. He plainly does not want to claim that New School religious ideas caused reform endeavors, for that would raise questions about all those Catholic-haters, teetotalers, and abolitionists who were not New School Calvinists. Such a claim would also raise questions about those New School Calvinists, like Taylor himself, who were not especially active in reform and about those, like Moses Stuart, who as reformers sometimes pulled up short of the ultraist position. So instead of causation, readers are given a number of euphemisms for it. Religion, they are told, provided a grounding, a frame of reference, a structure, and a framework for reform such that there was a "correlation between theological concepts and reform rhetoric" (p. 4).

The problem is, the theological concepts that Hirrel finds to be correlated with reform rhetoric were neither peculiar to nor distinguishing marks of New School Calvinism. Countless Americans of diverse religious loyalties shared a belief that truths were universal and objective, that conspiracies were prevalent and perfidious, and that the millennium would not be won without a struggle. Because the religious ideas discussed in the chapters on reform are so broad and general, one wonders why ninety pages must be first spent detailing the things that were distinctive about New School theology. In fact, the real link between the book's sections on religion and reform seems to be not principles but personnel. The argument is made adjectivally: New School clergymen who participated in reform movements are called New School reformers, which does not any more prove religious influence than would terming another group New School house painters.

What is most surprising, I suppose, is that Hirrel did not focus on the theological concept that truly was the earmark of the New England Theology from Edwards to Taylor—the voluntarist explanation of moral agency. Given the Edwardsians' distinction between natural ability and moral inability, a distinction central to their understanding of moral accountability, it makes sense that New School Calvinists would seek to eliminate those sources of natural, involuntary inability—whether the paralyzing power of alcohol or the slaveholder's lash—that kept their victims from being voluntary, and hence accountable, moral agents.

Children of Wrath is not a bad book, but it doesn't do as much as it could with the topic it has chosen. George M. Marsden's *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (1970) is still the best book on the subject.

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Hungry Heart: The Literary Emergence of Julia Ward Howe. By Gary Williams. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 1999. Pp. xii, 273; 12 illustrations. \$34.95.)

Gary Williams, Professor of English at the University of Idaho, in his study of "the literary emergence of Julia Ward Howe," has recovered for scholars both an intrinsically important poetic voice and a notable precursor of the nineteenth-century poetic giants Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. The United States literary canon has thus far represented her only with her 1862 "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," set to the tune of "John Brown's Body" (*The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 3d ed.). The recent, excellent anthology *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets* (1998) edited by Paula Bernat Benet goes further to include seven poems ranging from 1849 to 1866. Williams's new study, however, demonstrates that Howe's *Passion-Flowers* and *Words for the Hour* deserve serious reconsideration. Williams notes that a *Harper's* reviewer claimed for *Passion-Flowers* "an audacious defiance of the wholesome precedents of composition," . . . words that seem almost to foreshadow the reception" of Walt Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* (p. 137). And Williams finds that an 1857 poem "The Shadow That Is Born with Us," in its conjunction of