

Weekly Feedback

In *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Nathan O. Hatch argues that American Christianity helped to empower and to elevate the status of ordinary people in the young republic. This populist movement, he explains, was contrary to the intentions of the framers of the Constitution. Hatch rightly believes that the “Founding Fathers” who drafted the Constitution did not truly believe in the equality of all citizens, as they preached. Gordon S. Wood attests to this same notion in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*.

Hatch credits the Christian church and all of its denominations for using the spirit of liberty and equality that stemmed from the American Revolution, to improve the status of ordinary men. Riding the popular wave of equality, commoners were seen as being equal to every member of the church. This spread of populism was unlike anything that had ever happened in Europe. Hatch explains that “no less than Tom Paine or Thomas Jefferson, populist Christians of the early republics [believed that they] ought to start the world over again (213).” However, he points to the unfortunate problem with populism in that great thinkers, such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson would never again be elected after the Revolutionary generation.

A population boom in the decades that followed the Revolution had a tremendous impact on the spread of popular Christianity in America. With this population growth, more individuals became priests who, consequently, were able reach out to more people. Hatch credits the church for abiding by the needs of its members. However, there were still problems with the church, such as women not being granted equal status with men, and certain denominations of the church continuing to tolerate acts of slavery.

American Christianity, nonetheless, was a breath of fresh air for the young nation. This was evident with the amount of gospel music that was written in this early period. At no other point in time, Hatch notes, “has the Christian church been blessed with such a furious and creative outpouring of vernacular song (160).” The church in this early period served as a guiding force, which helped its members to deal with the insecurity that revolutions bring. Without the Kings and Queens of England to pave a direction for people, with an established social order, there was a lack of direction for the common man that needed to be filled. The Christian church was there to provide this guidance and in a liberating way. They stressed individualism and they encouraged their members to lead their own lives. At the same time, though, the church was there to offer a sense of community to people, which was the equivalent, if not more powerful than a traditional social class. This community was there to give purpose and direction to people’s lives. It provided guidance and security to people, which effectively helped to increase church membership. The church allowed individuals to accomplish more in their lives than they could otherwise. As Hatch explains, the church “ascribed authority to preachers ill qualified to stand for public office (226).” In this sense, the church is the earliest representation of a true democracy in American history.