



Born of Water and Spirit: The Baptist Impulse in Kentucky, 1776-1860

Richard Traylor

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Between 1776 and the mid-1800s, the number of Baptists in the United States grew at a staggering rate, rising from fifty thousand at the outbreak of revolution to more than a million as the nation edged toward civil war. As the Second Great Awakening swept through the Old Southwest, it generated religious enthusiasm among Methodist and Baptist converts who were intent upon replacing old forms of Protestantism with an evangelical vibrancy that reflected and often contributed to the unsettled social relations of the new republic. No place was better suited to embrace this enthusiasm than Kentucky. In *Born of Water and Spirit*, Richard C. Traylor explores the successes and failures of Baptists in this area, using it as a window into the elements of Baptist life that transcended locale.

Traylor argues that the achievements of Baptists in Kentucky reflect, in many ways, their success and coming of age in the early national period of America. The factionalism that characterized frontier Baptists, he asserts, is an essential key to understanding who the colonial Baptists had been, who they were becoming in the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries, and who they would become after the Civil War.

In this highly nuanced study, Traylor looks at the denomination in light of what he calls its “Baptist impulse”—the movement’s fluid structure and democratic spirit. These characteristics have proven to be its greatest strength as well as the source of its most terrible struggles. Yet, confronting theological clashes, along with the challenges that come with growth, forged the Baptist identity and shaped its future.

The first three chapters examine the primary elements of the impulse: rituals of conversion, baptism, and communion; the Baptist preacher; and the significance of the local church to the sect. Following these chapters are explorations of the reformations and forces of change in the early to mid-1800s, the role of women and African Americans in developing the group, and the refinement and reorientation of priorities from 1840 to 1860. This important denominational history will be of great value to scholars of American religious history and the history of the early American republic.

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