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Review: *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England*

By ANDREW JUCHNO
GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

How did New England Puritans reconcile their faith with the emergence of scientific empiricism? As Sarah Rivett, a literary scholar at Princeton, tells it, they did so with relative ease. Rivett argues that both Puritans and practitioners of the new science grappled with the limitations of humankind's perceptive faculties.

By the middle of the 17th century, the "study of the soul and the study of the world" had emerged as "parallel empirical techniques." Animated by the essential optimism of John Calvin's *Institutes*, Puritan studies of the soul and scientific studies of the world eagerly sought answers for seemingly unknowable questions. Like Charles Webster, a towering figure in the history of science and medicine, Rivett clarifies the often-murky relationship between religion

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and science in the early modern world. Unlike Webster, Rivett closely considers the place of women and native peoples in that history, as well as the nature of the evidence that "soul" scientists examined.

In her study of the Puritan soul, Rivett looks at the public testimonials of faith that ministers recorded in order to verify congregants' experiences with God's grace. As testimonials gained in popularity, there emerged in New England a "science of self-scrutiny" that was akin to an "experimental religious empiricism." Men and women engaged with that science differently, for ministers rarely encouraged women to speak publicly. Although a few of the men who developed the "science of the soul" valued female public testimony, Rivett finds that masculine voices dominated the genre, rendering women socially invisible in it. Other sources of religious knowledge, though, were much more feminine.

Whereas masculine testimony dominated the congregation, feminine testimony dominated the home. Rivett concludes that the Puritans privileged the deathbed testimonies of faith given by women above those of men. Unencumbered by the formalities of public testimony, this "soul data" was outside of the congregational, public worship context and thus considered purer. Living out the *ars moriendi*—the art of dying well—provided data closer

to the early modern philosopher John Locke's *tabula rasa* or blank slate, free of preconceptions. In keeping with her theme of the cohesion between religion and science at the time, Rivett shows that both clerics and natural philosophers valued this pure data. For the minister Cotton Mather, it evidenced God's grace; for the scientist Thomas Willis, it revealed spirits lurking in the optic nerve. And women were not the only marginalized group of people that ministers and natural philosophers relied upon in their search for truth.

Turning her attention to praying towns—settlements in Massachusetts designed to convert native peoples—Rivett shows that soul scientists took the opportunity to make ethnographic and linguistic observations about the Indian inhabitants. As with women's deathbed testimonies, priests and scientists alike used this indigenous data, although for different purposes. For missionaries like John Eliot, learning native tongues facilitated conversion and might even bring about Christ's second coming. For those who were keen on taxonomy, linguistic study had the potential to uncover a universal, pre-Babelian tongue, a general human language before separate languages arose.

Rivett notes that King Philip's War and the ensuing decimation of Northeastern indigenous people eliminated whatever hope ministers and natural philosophers had for using Indian testimony and language as "evidence of biblical prophecy and natural history." But this violence did not defeat the soul scientists, for a different instance of brutality provided a host of new data.

Against the historiographical grain, Professor Rivett interprets the Salem witch trials as a dispute over the validity of supernatural evidence. In her narrative, the trials epitomized the rational application of empirical methods to the preternatural world. In this moment, the purposes of theologians and scientists diverged. Scientists were none too happy with Cotton Mather's appropriation of their techniques, for Mather bridged the once-solid divide between the visible, knowable world and the invisible, unknowable one. A contest between theologians and mechanical philosophers followed, with profound consequences: spectral evidence—evidence that was unseeable and unverifiable—now received legal recognition. Although Rivett's interpretation of the trials is sound, her use of Mather presents an interpretive challenge. As is clear in his

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The Metaphysical Confederacy

By CASIMIR ZABLOTSKI
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Southern sensibilities prior to the Civil War are often underlooked and misrepresented as a one-dimensional justification of slavery. James O. Farmer's *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* sketches an intellectual history of the Old South while also exploring Thornwell's theology and views on slavery. Characterizing him as both a product of his society and a key player in it, Farmer asserts that his subject is a perfect window into the leading debates and controversies of the antebellum South. Through Thornwell, the book also highlights the Old South's often-understudied intellectual prowess and depth of belief.

Farmer believes that Thornwell epitomized Calvinism, with its belief in humankind's total moral depravity, and "can be seen as the prototype of Deep South religious thought." He stresses that the prominent theologian's beliefs, representative of the Southern mind, were formed in reaction to, and against, the modernizing forces that shaped the North. Northern society had become focused on economic progress and worldly success, whereas the South rejected what it viewed as the excesses of modern science, and saw a common bond among humans not in their abstract rights but the equalizing burden of universal sin. Farmer argues that this disjuncture between the North and the South developed into an irreconcilable civilizational struggle, and Thornwell's beliefs were indicative of the predominant sense of Southern identity that preceded secession.

A key focus of Thornwell's writings was the proper role of reason. Thornwell believed that the North's unwavering commitment to reason, especially applying it to Scripture, was a folly because it denied man's terribly flawed nature. "To prefer the deductions of philosophy to a Divine revelation," he wrote, "is to relinquish the sun for the stars." Reason, stemming from the mind of a morally fallen creature, was itself flawed. And Thornwell believed there were incomprehensible truths – divine truths – that the intelligentsia of the North wrongly believed they could prove or disprove with their minds alone. He further believed reason was in danger of going beyond its rightful place by intellectualizing all matters, infringing upon the supernatural realm by undermining the validity of divine revelations. But insistence on a firm split between the natural and the supernatural did not mean, in his case, a rejection of science and reason, as some

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ruminations in *The Christian Philosopher*, Mather occupied a space between theologians and natural philosophers. If he had truly split the two groups of enquirers, he would have had to split himself.

The “science of the soul” ended with the theologian and minister Jonathan Edwards. Attempting to revive the testimonial form in Northampton and Stockbridge, Massachusetts, he connected the natural world to the divine. A transitional figure, Edwards as Rivett presents him was the last Puritan to search the soul for evidences of grace. He was also a leader of what some historians call the “Evangelical Enlightenment,” a Protestant strand of the larger 18th-century shift towards scientific thought. Because Edwards could not sustain that Enlightenment, argues Rivett, his retirement ended the Puritan knowledge quest that defiantly insisted on the human capacity to know. And, according to Rivett, thus ended the application of empirical, scientific tools to the study of

divinity. A “new independent and self-sufficient” religion (self-sufficient in the sense that it was independent of scientific inquiry) took hold of New England.

Despite its provocative arguments and interpretive brilliance, *The Science of the Soul* has three weaknesses that may lessen its impact. Firstly, its dependence on theoretical jargon can be confusing. Secondly, the author (somewhat haphazardly) inserts performance theory into her analysis, yet makes no mention of the performance theorists whom she draws upon. This stilted and overly academic interpretation understands all phenomena to be performances. At one point, Rivett claims that Edwards’s “sermon series performs the infinite expandability of the cosmic circles . . .” How a sermon could “perform” something is beyond me.

Although I was annoyed by the book’s jargon language and tendency to emphasize theoretical frameworks more than strong archival evidence, it has a greater flaw.

Rivett gives so much attention to the close reading and literary criticism of published works that readers are left wondering how the illiterate, and people who lacked access to printed materials, engaged with soul science. The reader could get the impression that the narrative begins with John Calvin, changes with Cotton Mather, and ends with Jonathan Edwards. “Vernacular” belief, the beliefs of the common people, has little role in Rivett’s high-level intellectual history.

Because of these criticisms, *The Science of the Soul* is likely more useful for specialists in early American religion and science than it is for generalists. That said, historians who consider those subjects would do well to engage with Rivett’s retelling of the early relationship between science and faith in New England. Rivett’s work testifies to the fact that reason and religion were very much in harmony in early New England. If that is no longer the case, that is because students have lost a sense of history. In reading this book, they should regain that perspective.

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scholars have asserted. According to Farmer, Thornwell thought “divine revelation was an ongoing process,” meaning that man would continue to learn new truths.

Thornwell believed that while many truths from Scripture should be self-evident, reason could observe things that are confirmed although not made explicit by God’s word: “The supernatural is that which alone is strictly and properly *revelation*; the natural is *confirmed*, but not

orthodoxy, criticizing his society from within but also bringing what he believed were its principles together in a synthesis that was intended to spiritually strengthen the South. Thus he helped to create a “metaphysical Confederacy” – a Southern nation of the mind – that preceded secession and the Confederate States of America.

Farmer argues that in cultivating this Southern cosmology, Thornwell was quintessentially conservative. He applies the

had never sinned and brought death into the world, with all our woe,” he claimed, “the bondage of man to man would never have been instituted,” and Earth was not meant to be a paradise free of suffering. Rather, Thornwell contended that due to man’s fallen nature – the same depravity that degraded reason – slavery was destined to exist, along with sickness, suffering, and death.

Thornwell also believed that slavery should be judged, on a case-by-case basis, by

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made known, by divine testimony.” But reason was still an inherently flawed tool, and humans were “doomed to drudge in a humbler sphere [where] we are content to know of the external world just what our senses reveal, of the world within us [only] what reflection can bring to light, and of the world above us what the inspiration of the Almighty may vouchsafe to impart.” Here Thornwell espouses a blend of empiricism and skeptical scientism – not pure rationalism – that Farmer believes stemmed from the Scottish “Common Sense” philosophy and Baconianism that in his view were predominant in the South.

This epistemology was part of a larger body of Southern values disconnected from those of the North. By the 1850s, the divide between the regions was not only political but philosophical, with neither side able to understand the other’s ideals; people in the two societies inhabited different mental universes. Farmer maintains that Thornwell was instrumental in shaping a Southern

skepticism toward the North’s emphasis on science and rationality to the political realm, asserting that it led Thornwell to conclude that the South needed to insulate itself from the larger world in order to protect its intellectual and cultural heritage against what he thought were radical modernizing forces. Viewing society as an organism, he espoused a unique sociology that sanctified the community over the individual (while acknowledging that individual morality was crucial to collective decency).

Thornwell is not, however, remembered mainly for his expansive epistemology or his novel sociology; instead, much of the scholarship on him stresses his regrettable defense of slavery. Farmer explains Thornwell’s ambivalence about slavery as a theologian and his position that the churches should stay out of political and social issues, which he maintained until secession became inevitable. Thornwell’s view of slavery owed much to his conservative disposition and his focus on maintaining social order. “If Adam

how masters individually treated their slaves. He sought to ameliorate slaves’ conditions while maintaining the institution, which he considered part of the social order. Often acknowledging that in a saved or redeemed world slavery would not exist, Thornwell posited a version of the Golden Rule which commanded masters to “give unto your servants that which is just and equal.”

Thornwell’s cerebral defense of slavery was, according to Farmer, part of a larger epistemological framework that was lodged deeply in the South’s mind before the Civil War. His book expertly analyzes Thornwell’s writings, adding nuance and context to the theological and ecclesiastical debates of his time. In doing so, it adds another dimension to the antebellum South. Through Thornwell, Farmer reveals how the South conceptualized much of its opposition to the North, how it approached various philosophical questions characteristic of the modern age, and how it questioned some aspects of slavery while also unfortunately justifying it.

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