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Review: Stuart Banner's 'The Death Penalty: An American History'

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is a massive amount of theological discussion here, but in Dorrien's attempt to contextualize and make his story relevant, the historical sometimes overshadows the theological. The addition of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and women's rights to the story of Henry Ward Beecher is justifiable, and the discussion of the connection between 19th-century feminism and racist ideology in the controversy over African-American suffrage is interesting, but it leads us far afield from theology.

This is especially the case with the treatment of Bushnell. "He is the person in this narrative I find most repugnant on issues pertaining to ethnicity, gender and cultural politics," Dorrien states. Such a position is fair, but it has its consequences. The subtleties of Bushnell's treatment of the atonement and other doctrinal topics are lost in its wake. Indeed, the narrative as a whole takes on most of its energy when the discussion shifts from theology to broader political and cultural questions. It may be a comment on the later history of American theological liberalism that at key places politics and not theology is this book's governing passion.

These caveats aside, this is a solid work of great scope. *The Making of American Liberal Theology* successfully presents the story of the emergence of American liberalism to a new generation of readers, and will ultimately connect this 19th-century story to the great themes of the 20th century.

The Death Penalty: An American History.

By Stuart Banner. Harvard University Press, 385 pp., \$29.95.

OUR HOTTEST, most divisive cultural arguments are often conducted without any awareness of historical context, as the debates over abortion and capital punishment attest. But it does not have to be this way. Historians Linda Gordon and, most recently, Leslie Reagan have written excellent works on the history of abortion in the United States. And Stuart Banner has now given us a history of the death penalty.

In this dispassionate but chillingly detailed survey of capital punishment, Banner, professor of law at St. Louis's Washington University, documents and explains the dramatic "changes in the arguments pro and con, in the crimes punished with death, in execution methods and rituals . . . [and] in the way Americans have understood and experienced the death penalty."

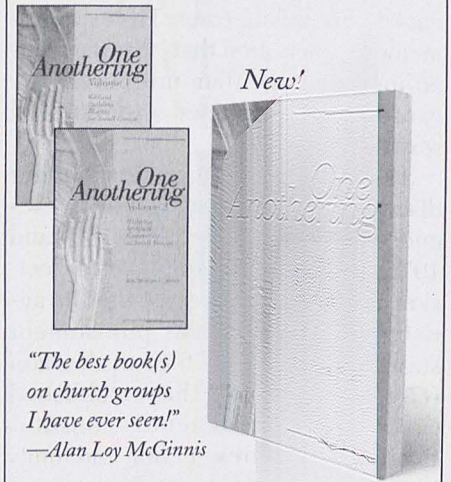
Since there were no prisons in colonial America, Banner observes, the death penalty served as "the standard punishment for a wide range of serious crime," including murder, rape, theft, arson and counterfeiting. Generally this meant public hanging, a ritualized spectacle that often involved sermons and confessions. But while capital punishment was the norm, there were deviations. These included "symbolic" executions, such as mock hangings and dramatic reprieves at the gallows, as well as "intensified" executions—e.g., burning at the stake, dismemberment and public display of the corpse. Such punishments were reserved for particularly threatening offenders like the pirate Joseph Andrews, whose body was hung high in an iron cage on an island just outside New York City, "a Spectacle to deter all Persons from the like Felonies for the Future."

Banner emphasizes that in colonial America executions were public affairs, conducted by the community for the deterrent benefit. But in the 19th century a growing squeamishness about hangings and the sort of crowds they attracted prompted states to begin moving executions behind jail walls, a process completed in the North by 1860 and in much of the South by 1900.

Over the next few decades the public was further removed from the killing process, as the "search for a clean, clinical, undisturbing method of execution" led to the electric chair and the gas chamber. Now executions were held indoors before a few select witnesses, and were administered not by local officials but by specialists in technological killing. Mississippi's

Reviewed by William Vance Trollinger Jr., associate professor of history at the University of Dayton.

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Jimmy Thompson, for example, traveled from execution to execution with the state's only electric chair in the back of his pickup truck. His expertise included the notion that "rapists needed more voltage than murderers because of their greater strength and sexual drive."

In the book's final section Banner discusses the dramatic decline in executions in the U.S. between 1880 and 1975; the 1972 Supreme Court decision (*Furman v. Georgia*) that invalidated all state capital punishment statutes; and, the 1976 court decision (*Gregg v. Georgia*) that established that capital punishment is constitutional if procedures guiding and limiting jury discretion are in place.

But as Banner observes in a chapter infelicitously titled "Resurrection"—referring to the dramatic resurgence of death sentences after 1976—the effort to rationalize sentencing has resulted in a terribly expensive but nonetheless haphazard capital punishment system: "Being executed [is] still, as Justice Stewart had put it in *Furman*, like being struck by lightning." Particularly liable to lightning strikes are poor southern black people

convicted of murdering a white person.

Since *Death Penalty* is a very broad survey, it is not surprising that there are some gaps. There are few references to religion and virtually no discussions of how religious groups have responded to and shaped public opinion regarding the death penalty. Nevertheless, Banner has produced a significant piece of scholarship. While his book will not prompt partisans to abandon their commitments, there is now no excuse for engaging in the capital-punishment debate in historical ignorance.

Godtalk: Travels in Spiritual America.

By Brad Gooch. Knopf, 388 pp., \$25.00.

TWO PROVOCATIVE insights surface in novelist and English professor Brad Gooch's introduction to *Godtalk*. The first is that the spiritual quest in America has become less superficial and "more sophisticated, more global and more interested in tradition." Borders are opening like never before between the world's cultures and religious traditions. A kind of free-trade agreement about rituals and practices is occurring, especially among the young.

The second is that "New Age" is becoming an obsolete term for the plethora of spiritual expressions originating outside mainstream Judeo-Christian religion. Even self-help books are evolving as a genre of popular wisdom literature "caught somewhere between memoir, common sense and sermon." Readers could convincingly argue that the book's subsequent chapters are comely but less than substantive elaborations of these insights based on the author's extensive, eclectic experience.

This book is quite different from the empirical assessment made in Robert C. Fuller's *Spiritual but Not Religious*. In contrast to Fuller's integrated evaluation, Gooch offers five unrelated snap-

Reviewed by Wayne A. Holst, a writer who has taught religion and culture at the University of Calgary.

shots of modern spiritual currents whose impact and fallout will be felt within and beyond mainstream religion.

He investigates modern spiritualism (*The Urantia Book*); the pop science, psychology and Hinduism of feel-good entrepreneur Deepak Chopra and other synthesizers of Eastern and Western science and spirituality; Trappist monasticism, especially the communities made famous by Thomas Merton; the homosexual church movement; and the Americanization of Islam.

Gooch could probably have delivered his message in less than half the space taken by the book. Nevertheless, he writes engagingly and with literary panache. America's religious landscape is indeed mutating, as Gooch argues. But American spirituality has always been in a state of transformation, and the more things are in flux, the more they tend to remain the same.

Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century.

By John Corrigan. University of California Press, 407 pp., \$40.00.

IN THIS delightful look at Americans' penchant for public displays of religious emotion, John Corrigan proposes that American revivalism helped turn emotion into a commodity. Emotion is, after all, our innermost possession. Culture's role is to provide strategies for controlling, conserving and surrendering this possession in ways that serve both our own and society's interests.

Nineteenth-century revivals constructed patterns for the proper transaction of emotion. They taught middle-class Protestants how best to trade this commodity with one another and with God. Corrigan opens his book with a quote from Karl Marx's *Capital*: "A commodity appears at first sight a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."

Corrigan focuses on the religious revival that unfolded among white,

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