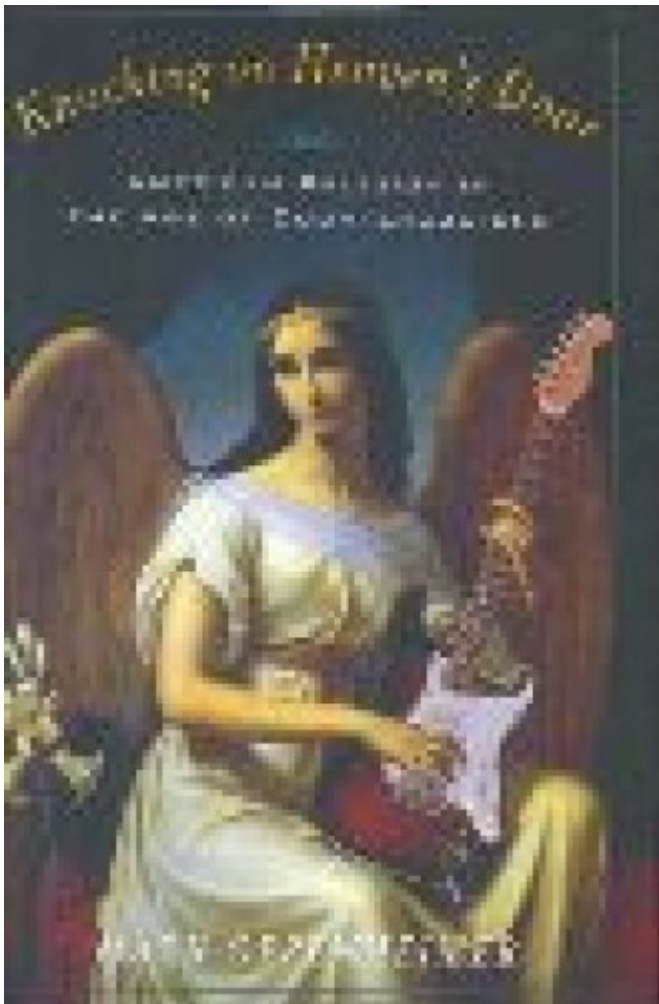


Knocking on Heaven's Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture

reviewed by [Marcia Z. Nelson](#) in the [May 4, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Knocking on Heaven's Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture

Mark Oppenheimer

Journalism is said to be the first draft of history. In this copiously researched book on the 1960s a former journalist offers an intriguing revision of one of those first drafts.

Mark Oppenheimer takes a fresh look at an era popularly known for its assault on all things traditional and sacred. A former writer for the *Hartford Courant* now working on a doctorate in religious studies at Yale University, Oppenheimer shifts the focus from the cultural extremes that so vividly identify the '60s—day-glo VW buses, communes with long-haired women and bearded men, black-power militancy—to mainstream institutions. He studies what effect the counterculture's demand for change had on major religious institutions.

Oppenheimer presents case studies of five battles within institutional religion during the Nixon years—battles that brought gay acceptance to Unitarians, female priests to Episcopalians, folk masses to Catholics, small worship groups to Jews and an antiwar message to Southern Baptists. Four of the five countercultural insurgencies managed to insinuate their way into the religious institutions they confronted.

Only the Southern Baptists ultimately gave no quarter to the pacifist dissent that, ironically, is part of Baptist history. Yet even this message—from youth who were at once idealistic and buttoned-down—at least got some hearing on the Baptist circuit.

Oppenheimer's revisionist view is that most Americans did not drop out but stayed within churches to express themselves religiously, despite the rhetoric about the era's "failure of ordinary religious institutions to provide satisfactory answers about the mysterious." Oppenheimer cites cultural historians, sociologists of religion, membership numbers and polls to argue that "Christians and Jews may have experimented, but mainline churches and synagogues were their laboratories."

Membership statistics have nuances that support a variety of conclusions. If Unitarians, a liberal denomination, grew by 30 percent between 1963 and 1976, if liberal Protestants and Jews have low birth rates while conservative Protestants have high birth rates, if church attendance across denominations has been relatively constant in the 20th century, then the received notion of liberal or mainline "decline" since the 1960s needs some complicating footnotes. In any event, denominational religion's twists and turns provide grist for the historian's mill, enhancing an overall understanding of the evolution of the American religious scene that includes a shift toward nondenominational religious expression.

Oppenheimer's careful review of documents and interviews with '60s figures suggest new views of the recent past. For example, in 1971 the Southern Baptist Convention instructed Southern Baptists to "work for legislation that will allow the possibility of abortion" for rape, incest, serious fetal deformity or maternal health reasons.

While today's Episcopal Church appears riven by the conflict over gay ordination, activists for women's ordination in the church 25 years ago held then-emerging gay activists at arm's length, even though some of those most active in the women's cause were themselves closeted lesbians. Causes and players change; institutional call and response to social challenge does not. Oppenheimer offers a study of organizational transformation and persistence that can reassure those who are nervous and defensive about attacks on esteemed institutions.

The case studies do beg some questions. It's not clear, for example, what made the Episcopal Church ready for women's ordination. On the one hand, writes Oppenheimer, the church "did not seem poised for a women's rights insurgency." On the other hand, the church's House of Bishops voted in 1971 and 1972, early in the ordination campaign, to affirm in principle women's ordination. Some parts of the church were evidently more ready than others—a situation that may apply today as world Anglican-Episcopalian ranks respond to the question of gay ordination.

It's also unpersuasive to characterize the '60s-inspired changes in the church as aesthetic rather than institutional, as Oppenheimer sometimes does. He rightly notes that style—who does what and how it engages a believer—is critical in religion. But changes in style take root when the institutional ground has been sufficiently worked to sustain new forms. Saying that polity hasn't changed, Oppenheimer writes that "the pope still makes decisions for the Catholic Church." Strictly speaking, he does, but if it were that simple, there would be a lot less shouting in the big Catholic tent—or that tent might be becoming smaller. The growing power of the Catholic laity to make governance decisions is capably presented in recent books by Peter Steinfels and David Gibson.

Nonetheless, Oppenheimer is for the most part good at offering the sort of "yes-buts" intended by these points of disagreement. His interpretation is fresh, carefully grounded and footnoted, and very readable. This study of the dance of institutional resistance and change is a welcome antidote to voices proclaiming decline in American religious forms.