

Business of the Heart, by John Corrigan

reviewed by [Robert Fuller](#) in the [July 31, 2002](#) issue

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, middle-class Boston Protestants in 1858. Because an inordinate number of businessmen participated in it, this outburst of religious excitement came to be known as the Businessmen's Revival. Corrigan uses diaries, journals and public records to show how the daily prayer meetings taught people how to meet subtle expectations concerning the public display of emotion. While understood as a subjective state, emotion was nonetheless viewed as an object, a thing that could be acquired and then prudently surrendered. Thus revivalgoers learned to have seizures of conscience, to cry out and to weep while engaging in prayer. Emotion was offered to God in exchange for divine favor.

This "business of the heart" reveals how fully religion is implicated in the broader sweep of middle-class culture. Corrigan explores the control and release of emotion during revival prayers in the broader context of the era's gender roles, family life and understandings of manhood. Even more significant is how revivalism's attempt to construct normative patterns of emotion implicated religion in the racial, ethnic and class struggles that dominated the period. Protestant revivalgoers operated out of a set of assumptions that allowed them to characterize African-Americans, Irish immigrants and abolitionists as overly emotional, bereft of emotion, lacking in emotional control or overly regulatory. Emotionality was thus as important a boundary-marker for the Protestant middle class as was skin color, dress or accent.

Corrigan's broader agenda is to establish a theoretical framework that has wide implications for linking religion and emotion. A tightly written appendix offers a survey of the "historiography of emotions," and readers are left spinning out new questions of their own. What, for example, might we learn about religion's relationship to emotions such as hate, envy or shame? Might there be a "normative theory of emotion" grounded in some mixture of sociobiology, developmental psychology and philosophical ethics? If so, can we distinguish between modes of religiosity that elicit healthy human functioning and those that thwart it? It is the genius of Corrigan's study that it leaves us asking such questions.