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C. Vann Woodward

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Review

CONFEDERATE THEOLOGY AND YANKEE ECONOMICS

If slavery was the South's original sin, is capitalism its penance?

Woodward, C. Vann

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Genovese, Eugene D. *A Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the White Christian South.* University of Georgia Press, ISBN 820320463

By the Christian South, Eugene Genovese means virtually the whole white population of the region. Catholics and Protestants are included with little attention to differences between them or to distinctions between the numerous sects of Protestantism. While representations of the squirearchy, the yeomanry, and the poor whites are not ignored, it is the ruling class that receives major attention and highest regard in these pages.

About the Old South's rulers Genovese wrote back in 1968 that they were "class conscious, socially responsible, and personally honorable." He found it hard to "condemn as immoral those who behave responsibly toward their class instead of someone [else's]. . . . If we blind ourselves to everything noble, virtuous, honorable, decent, and selfless in a ruling class, how do we account for its hegemony?"

Thirty years later he seems to hold pretty much the same view of that class. In the few references he makes to their bourgeois counterparts up North, he is less generous both to them and to their doctrine that "time is money."

Not that our historian regards Southern society as flawless or its rulers without their own moral dilemmas and failures. In fact, the problem of slavery is the central concern of his new book. The defense and justification of slavery involved not only the ruling class and slave owners but, with the exception of the few emancipationists, the whole society. Involved in the ongoing defense were representatives of all its articulate components -- intellectuals, poets, novelists, journalists, politicians, and most prominently, the clergy of all denominations. It

was only natural that a society of white, churchgoing, pious worshipers should look to their ministers and priests for guidance in matters of such gravity.

Genovese's thorough and scholarly search of their published sermons, and theological and philosophical writings, persuade him that the Southern clergy and theologians were almost unanimous in their support of slavery. Furthermore they relied almost entirely upon the Holy Scripture in their defense of the institution -- the unquestionable "Word of God."

The lawfulness of slavery thus was no more questionable than the existence of God. In citing Abraham and Old Testament patriarchs as slaveholders they also won the support of Southern Jews. Christians were reminded that Jesus and the Apostles never preached against slavery and that it was money changers, and not slaveholders, that Christ drove from the temple.

Southern divines did not sanction evil

But how could Southern divines sanction the appalling evils of slaveholders? The answer is they did not. While they agreed that the institution had divine approval, the obedience demanded from slaves was balanced by an insistence that slaveholders were charged by God's word with "Christian responsibilities" towards their servants -- including restraint in use of powers so often abused.

Increasing numbers of clerics preached reforms calling for the right of slave marriage, the integrity of slave families, and repeal of laws against slave literacy. They were able to touch some uneasy consciences, but the risks of reformers were too daunting for many, especially after slave revolts and plots spread fear and trembling.

Politicians, parsons, and the ruling class searched God's word in vain for support of states' rights and secession, but their people sprang to arms with firm conviction that God was on their side in the war for independence. Confederate victories were interpreted as gifts of God; defeats as His punishment for sins. Religious revivals swept the ranks and conversions soared when prospects turned bleak.

One Confederate general in a post-war lament declared, "I think it was a serious incubus upon us that during the whole war our president & many of our

generals really and actually believed that there was this mysterious Providence always hovering over the field & ready to interfere on one side or the other, & that prayers & piety might win its favor from day to day." Faith in divine favor prevailed to the end, and defeat was believed to be God's will.

The fall of the Confederacy, as Genovese says, "proved traumatic for the white Christians of the South." There was no one explanation. A Presbyterian minister declared it "the only inexplicable anomaly of history." Many thought it God's punishment, not for slavery per se, but for man's abuse of it. One woman declared it the result of too much faith in General Lee and too little in God. Anyway, it was God's will. As one Virginian taunted the Yankees, "After all, it was not you but God that abolished slavery. You were mere instruments to do his work."

Two recent articles from Germany have compared that country's guilt over Nazi atrocities with the defeated South's sense of guilt over slavery. Too recent for Genovese's notice, it is nevertheless clear that he would have none of that comparison. Admitting that a few slaveholders may have professed guilt for failing to live up to standards of Christian slaveholding and that able scholars have held that many Southerners tormented themselves with guilt for owning slaves, he argues that "the mass of the slaveholders -- and non-slaveholders for that matter -- accepted slavery as ubiquitous in history, as sanctioned by Scripture, and as a fact of life."

If accepting defeat was traumatic for Confederates, making peace with their conquerors would prove as bitter for true believers. Churchmen resisted submission to free-labor capitalism and the hated bourgeois social order that they blamed for all the evils the Confederacy had risen to oppose. For divines, this included the North's scientific racism that clashed with religious orthodoxy in denying that blacks and whites were a single species and teaching polygenesis and a subhuman status for blacks.

Granting that the slave trade was of capitalist origins, Genovese holds that slaveowners did their utmost to garb slavery in traditional and modern defenses. He is pleased to report that "slaveholders read with respect socialists . . . although, to their cost, they did not know Marx, and like the socialists, they assumed that . . . capitalists simply could not provide the stewardship of labor of which Christian capitalists might aspire."

Conforming to the social order of the victor

Despite all their contorted ideological defenses, their complicated theological defiance of the Antichrist, their ghastly war casualties, and their bitter determination never to conform to the social order of the victor, Southerners did gradually, reluctantly, and sadly conform. As our historian puts it, they "found themselves enmeshed in a materialistic, marketplace society that promoted competitive individualism and worshiped Mammon."

There were, after all, aspects of the new order that proved useful in dealing with new Southern problems. Racism and white supremacy had a strong appeal for employers seeking to control the new freedmen. White supremacy and racial segregation were useful to politicians seeking to divert poor white voters from radical demands. Lynching protected white womanhood and stopped "mongrelizations." Unemployed masses of whites eagerly sought jobs at any wages in the new mines and factories that capitalist carpetbaggers opened. Churches capitulated to segregation throughout society as well as to black disenfranchisement and racist politics. Some brave clergymen resisted, but New South editors and orators drowned them out with their championship of the values of a triumphant Yankeeedom.

Surely we have in this small volume a remarkable and important contribution to Southern history during its most critical period. It is written with intellectual rigor and impressive scholarship. Agree with the author's interpretations or not -- his book belongs on the required reading list of all seriously interested in Southern history.

C. Vann Woodward is Sterling Professor of History Emeritus at Yale and author of Origins of the New South.