Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898

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Review

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Repressive reconciliation

One (white, Protestant) nation, under God

In the first two chapters of Edward J. Blum's *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898*, northern opinion leaders during Reconstruction are aflame with redefining the United States. But these idealistic fires subside to smoldering embers during the 1870s, cool further in the 1880s, and by the 1890s disappear altogether, replaced by a new imperialistic passion bent on acquiring global dominance. By the close of his study, the emerging national identity is militaristically triumphant, replete with intersectional understandings concerning a supposed burden to dominate non-white peoples both at home and abroad.

In exploring the ways Protestant Christianity in the North contributed to a new sense of white American nationalism during the Gilded Age, *Reforging the White Republic* reviews an ugly underside of Christianity that over the ages has repeatedly encouraged various bigotries. Professor Blum sadly notes that the religious imaginations of many Americans today continue to exhibit this bad habit. His narrative provides a cultural and theological challenge. If Christianity does stand at the core of America's national identity, a point that Blum believes, which Christianity is it? Is it a counter-cultural Christianity, striving to reshape the nation according the Sermon on the Mount? Or, is it a religion undeniably at ease with wealth, worldly power, and ethnocentrism armed with an arrogant pretense of military supremacy? Blum thoroughly describes a late 19th-century American Protestantism that blessed imperialistic military adventures abroad and gross inequities at home, and in doing so he defines an American civil religion that is the servant of values that are far from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.
For better or worse, American culture has long blended American nationalism with Christian influences. Our political leaders often seek to inspire us with religious rhetoric. This was especially so in the 19th century. Abraham Lincoln, despite the fact that he never joined a church, frequently talked in terms of Providential will, and in doing so reflected the expectations of his age. His Second Inaugural Address, which he regarded as his greatest speech, implied that God desired two historical results for the United States that later became (at least in the short-run) mutually exclusive: One was racial reconciliation. That was a task that Lincoln's party unsuccessfully embarked upon in Reconstruction. The other was sectional reconciliation, the story of which provides the major portion of Blum's book.

Reconstruction slowly crumbled under a steady assault of terrorist acts that revealed the intensity of white southern certainty on matters concerning race. And as this occurred, northern Protestant God talk sought to divert national attention away from issues involving race to those having better prospects for political success. At that juncture, a supposed Roman Catholic threat to the nation's Protestant hegemony took center stage in the political arena. Hoards of Irish immigrants, it was claimed, could never become wholly American in that they were not Protestant. In 1870, at the very moment when Reconstruction was being handed back to southern state governments, the Roman Catholic Church established doctrinal positions demanding allegiance to a divinely blessed and infallible papal authority over earthly national sovereignty. Sensing that racial Reconstruction was not going well, Republicans highlighted the foreign Catholic danger to the American nation. The issue was highly volatile in a political context that identified growing Irish Catholic political muscle with the resurgence of the national Democratic Party. President Grant even proclaimed the Catholic Church's political influence as the greatest threat to the national well being since the slave-power conspiracy. At the close of Reconstruction, Republican politicians were far more united in an effort to keep this foreign religious threat in check than in holding the fort against white supremacy. In 1876, with the failure of the proposed Blaine Amendment that was designed to prevent a Roman Catholic takeover of American public education, together with the confused elections of that year, the Compromise of 1877 became a foregone conclusion.

Unfortunately, Professor Blum makes no mention of the Republican anti-Catholic crusade during the latter stages of Reconstruction. His narrative of
postwar northern Protestant political commentary goes too quickly from Henry Ward Beecher's early call for sectional accommodation to the spiritual comforts of Dwight Lyman Moody's revivals. Despite this one oversight, Blum's narrative is nevertheless very valuable in analyzing the post-Reconstruction stage of Protestant evangelical political thought during the Gilded Age.

Having failed to continue Reconstruction with an anti-Catholic emphasis, northern evangelicals successfully united with southern Protestants under the banner of white supremacy. This indirectly accommodated an anti-Catholic agenda, as an intersectional Protestantism was then deemed essential for the nation's future religious health. Ironically, had the religiously bigoted approach centered on anti-Catholicism proven successful in the mid-1870s, racial reconciliation might have continued in its wake, for the overwhelming majority of African Americans were Protestant allies in the culture struggles of the time. But with that option sidetracked, northern Protestants came to accept that which was non-negotiable to their southern white evangelical brethren—the racial understanding that the United States was, should, and always remain a white man's country. As Blum correctly points out at several points in his narrative, this racially bigoted approach could also be anti-Catholic, but that was not its central character. Race—not religion—was primary.

Throughout Reconstruction, white southerners chanted for home rule, by which they meant white supremacy. Republican politicians such as President Ulysses S. Grant, Ohio's Governor Rutherford B. Hayes, and presidential aspirant James G. Blaine countered that a better understanding of home rule meant keeping Protestants controlling the principal levers of national power. By keeping a Republican in the White House, the Compromise of 1877 temporarily blocked Roman Catholic influence at the national level, but in the process Republicans surrendered to white supremacy. Evangelical Protestantism supplied necessary cultural supports for a new intersectional understanding in the era that followed. Northern and southern Protestants ceased to be at loggerheads, as they had been during the era of Civil War and Reconstruction. The slippery slope toward a national white identity followed over the subsequent two decades. To his credit, Professor Blum describes in detail how this slide occurred.

Dwight Lyman Moody plays a central role in Blum's narrative. Arising in the mid-1870s, Moody led revivals emphasizing spiritual conversions and personal piety. His message was ideally suited to a public eager for intersectional peace. By Moody's understanding, a worldly emphasis on civil rights and social
justice had no meaningful role in Christianity. By contrast, his message allowed a comfortable spiritualized escape from the travails and betrayals of racial reconciliation, as Moody trumped systematic theology with sentimental story telling involving heroic wartime acts of both blue and gray. Moody's success encouraged reunifying the nation under a banner of white self-satisfaction.

With the complete restoration of white southern political power in 1877, sectional reconciliation could only occur upon a white foundation. One example highlighted by Blum involves the expansion of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Frances Willard, who became the organization's president in 1879, discerned that liquor's abolition could never be realized nationally until her cause spread across the Mason-Dixon Line into the former Confederacy. By muting racial reconciliation and turning a blind eye toward mounting lynching statistics, Willard advanced her crusade. Arm-in-arm against alcoholic Roman Catholics in the North and drunken blacks in the South, northern and southern anti-saloon reformers celebrated their common Protestant Anglo-Saxon heritage, then fast becoming a *sine qua non* of post-Reconstruction American nationality.

As racism ceased to be the nation's leading problem, Protestant Anglo-Saxons looked outward upon a global mission field needing white American redemption. Rev. Josiah Strong's *Our Country* (1885) became the Protestant template for the close of the era. Denigration of both foreign people of color and those at home went hand in hand.

Throughout the 19th century, both nationalism and Christianity called for reformulating the American republic. Blum's account juxtaposes two radically different models within this singular theme. The book begins with what Abraham Lincoln termed a new birth of freedom, a message that provides hope that someday the egalitarian ideals of the Declaration of Independence may become fully realized. His book concludes with the other bi-polar possibility, that this is a country of, by, and for privileged elites, defined by religious, class, and racial identities that are supposedly favored by God. Implied throughout the work is the author's subtle suggestion that these two models continue to wrestle within our national identity. Edward J. Blum's study provides us a remarkable historical window from which to view our own time as we ponder where we are now headed as a people.

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