

God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War

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Review

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Rable, George C. *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-8078-3426-8

Reflecting on the Religious History of the Civil War

George Rable is one of the most eminent historians working on the American Civil War today. Winner of a slew of academic awards and honors, including the 2003 Lincoln Prize for *Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!*, Rable's latest study, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples*, should only enhance his reputation. Building on more than a generation of scholarship, Rable offers the most comprehensive and deeply researched account of the role of religion in the American Civil War to date. Covering soldiers, ministers, chaplains, politicians, understudied groups such as Mormons, Jews, and Catholics, as well as civilians on the home front, no other study has canvassed such a collection of source material on the topic. While Rable draws extensively on period newspapers, sermons, and denominational records, he also profitably mines untold numbers of personal papers. Because of the bibliography alone—which checks in at nearly one hundred pages, with more than half of it devoted to primary sources—*God's Almost Chosen Peoples* should become the starting point for any future studies of religion and the Civil War.

One of Rable's major themes concerns the overwhelming significance of civil-religious providential understandings of the course of conflict. For his subjects the hand God was seemingly everywhere, guiding and shaping events in accordance with his will. All too frequently, that providential outlook was conflated—in ways consistent with patterns throughout American religious history to that time—with southern and northern nationalist aspirations. Perhaps this idea was stated most clearly in language approved by one northern Methodist conference in 1862: "Patriotism is a Christian virtue" (153).

Because of deep commitments to providentialism in the Civil War era, “religious faith could be both wind and weathervane,” where success or failure in battles showed adherents the ways in which they had met or fallen short of divine expectations, thus incurring God’s favor or wrath (7). Throughout the war, Union and Confederate officials, as well as local leaders and ministers, called routinely for days of fasting and thanksgiving in an attempt to make sure the public properly aligned itself with God’s will. Furthermore, despite innumerable difficulties, Rable contends that belief in providence maintained a remarkable resiliency. Not only did the religious “line between ‘loyalty’ and ‘disloyalty’” grow “ever-sharper” as the war dragged on, but after Appomattox, believers in the Union continued to understand their cause sanctioned by God (354). In the same way, defeated Confederates did not give up the belief in the righteousness of the cause lost.

Given the impressive amount of research displayed, the single most curious thing about *God’s Almost Chosen Peoples* is its self-professed lack of an overarching argument—in Rable’s words, it “is not a thesis-driven work” (6). Instead, he opts for a “broad narrative” that shows the centrality of religious belief for nineteenth-century Americans who needed to make sense out of the warring world they found themselves in (6). Rable’s choice will no doubt leave some readers grasping to impose coherence on an unwieldy and intimidating subject. However, because religious values were by no means uniform or monolithic in the Civil War era, and because Rable intends to cover the sweep of religious engagement with the myriad dilemmas that the sectional conflict raised, his broad narrative approach leads to a remarkable inclusivity with regard to topics and subjects.

Rable makes a two-fold historiographic point with this decision. First, he aims to address what he sees as a major oversight in the subject’s general literature. For many actors in the period, divine action was indistinguishable from the course of events. Yet, as Rable puts it, “the absence of virtually any reference to religious forces in the standard Civil War narratives is remarkable” and ignores a critical aspect of nineteenth-century American life (396). Stated bluntly, for most people at the time, God was at work. Any interpretation of the Civil War that misses this fact fails to fully account for the conflict’s history.

Second, recent years—especially since the 1998 publication of *Religion and the American Civil War* (Oxford University Press), edited by Randall Miller, Harry Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson—have witnessed a flourishing of

specialized studies of the relationship between religion and the sectional conflict. Rable is generally appreciative of this work, but he calls for a more expansive and all-encompassing understanding of religion's place in the narrative of the period. The story of the religion and the Civil War, Rable argues, cannot merely be reduced to competing civil religions, nationalistic views of providence, the religious lives of soldiers, the religious meaning of emancipation, or any number of other narrative threads. Rable argues that imposing a thesis on a subject that is not "straightforward" would diminish his ability to offer a complete portrait of the role of faith in the conflict (6).

The significance of this approach becomes most apparent as Rable attempts to weave into his narrative groups that do not fit entirely comfortably with the providentialist nationalism of Confederate or Union clergy and public leaders. For dissenters—like St. Louis Presbyterian Samuel McPheeters or Southern Methodists who resented U.S. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton's 1863 directive for Northern Methodists to take control of disloyal churches—and members of historic peace churches such as Quakers or Mennonites, providence was clearly at work, but not in the same ways as more committedly nationalistic cheerleaders would have seen matters. The same can be said about African Americans, who might have agreed with antislavery northern whites as they praised God for slavery's end, but also resisted overtures from those same whites as they continued to treat blacks as racially dependent in the wake of emancipation.

Soldiers also encountered religion quite differently from the mainstream of patriotic Confederate or Union ministerial or political leaders. As Rable contends, combat made "the connection between civil religion and soldier faith . . . more vivid and meaningful" than could possibly have been imagined or experienced by those outside the fray (159–60). For many soldiers, calls to arms prompted inward reflection about the state of their souls. For those who believed in the civil religious synthesis of patriotism and piety, it was possible to face battle with the knowledge of future glory. That, in turn, provided a kind of fatalistic security against the prospect of death. The majority of soldiers, however, remained seemingly nonreligious. As Rable shows, "Christian soldiers" were always a minority in both the Union and Confederate armies (127). The camp offered innumerable temptations, and even the devout lamented that army life undermined soldiers' opportunities for faithful practice.

Yet for believers on both sides—people especially inclined to see military action as the outworking of a divine mandate—unbelieving or nominally devoted

soldiers still served in a righteous cause. Rable concludes his volume by suggesting that the Civil War might have been “the ‘holiest’ war in American history” (397). While historians of other military struggles may choose to assess the relative merits of this claim, *God’s Almost Chosen Peoples* thoroughly establishes how critical religion was to all facets America’s bloodiest conflict.

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