

The Politics of Faith During the Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Kurtz, William (2013) "The Politics of Faith During the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.4.18

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss4/18>

Review

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Fall 2013

Wesley, Timothy L. *The Politics of Faith During the Civil War*. Louisiana State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 978-0-8071-5000-9

An Important Review on the Intesection of Religion and War

Since the late 1990s Civil War scholars have increasingly realized the importance of religion in our nation's bloodiest conflict. George Rable's *Religion and the American Civil War* (2010) seemingly covered every important aspect of religion's influence on the United States' most bloody conflict. Dr. Timothy Wesley's insightful *The Politics of Faith during the Civil War*, however, proves that there are still new things to be said on the subject. By focusing on Protestants (the vast majority of Americans at this time) and (to a lesser extent) Catholics, whites and African-Americans, and Northerners and Southerners, Wesley's book is an important contribution to our understanding of religion's significant influence on the home front during the war.

Wesley's study examines the importance of "political preaching" during the mid-nineteenth century. Preaching on partisan politics had largely been shunned by most ministers before the war although direct participation in social reform movements like temperance was deemed acceptable. Even as the political debates over slavery grew heated, goading many northern ministers into directly condemning the institution, political preaching remained controversial to many northerners and was widely condemned in southern pulpits (8-11).

The advent of the Civil War suddenly made it more acceptable (and in some people's view obligatory) for the clergy to talk openly about politics in both the United and Confederate States of America. Many scholars, following the lead of Harry Stout's *Upon the Altar of the Nation* (2006), have portrayed the northern and southern clergy as united in supporting their respective governments. Wesley, however, has painted a more nuanced picture by showing that ministers were not simply "co-opted by the state" into uncritically supporting every action or policy of the Confederacy or the Union. While some historians have tended to

criticize clergymen for not adhering to the non-violent aspects of their religion, Wesley instead argues that “Christians imagined themselves patriots because of—and not in defiance of—their religious beliefs” (2). In fact, the entire book is an explicit rebuke of judging Civil-War era ministers as complicit in the slaughter of the war because they reacted patriotically rather than pacifically to Fort Sumter. Wesley’s careful attention to a variety of pro-war and anti-war clerics shows that both criticism and support of the war were based on equally valid interpretations of Christianity’s teaching on armed conflict.

Wesley makes two other important observations. First, that the political and religious often overlapped in American society and the war “exposed that fact.” Second, that not only were the two governments concerned about the influence of a disloyal clergy but that religious leaders and citizens “voluntarily” infringed on the civil liberties of churches, ministers, and members of the faithful who were deemed disloyal (2-3). Such governmental and voluntary oppression happened both in the North and Border States, in Union-occupied areas of the South, and in pro-Union areas of the Confederacy.

Wesley’s study does not contradict the prevailing idea that many if not the majority of ministers and lay people were adamantly pro-Union or pro-Confederate. As he states on page 45, “Northern churchmen and women increasingly conflated support of President Lincoln and his administration’s policies with church loyalty and Christian righteousness.” Later he argues that in the process of creating a new Confederate national identity, “no group played a more prominent role than the denominational clergy” (122). However, Wesley also clearly demonstrates that there was a range of opinion on just how involved the clergy should be in discussing political topics. While placing certain ministers, citizens, and denominations into one of three positions on wartime preaching, Wesley persuasively shows that in fact a variety of northerners and southerners could be found holding all of these viewpoints during the war.

The first position on political preaching, what Wesley calls the “separate-spheres” view, believed that the church should hold itself aloof from all partisan politics for the only suitable subjects for a sermon were purely religious (95). Second, a more moderate position called “separate-duty” argued that ministers could comment on the moral and religious aspects of the war as long as they did not suggest political solutions for the problem (105). Third, the “separate-component” mindset, professed by such ministers as Henry Ward Beecher and so heavily criticized in recent historical scholarship, argued that

church leaders had a duty to support the war effort and to comment and intervene in political and secular issues. Supporters of this “patriotic” viewpoint dismissed the very term “political preaching” as a phrase used by disloyal ministers, politicians, and citizens who sought to undermine the war effort (111-113).

Like Rable, Wesley wisely choose to incorporate a variety of Christians from both the North and South, giving his study a comparative element that other works which focus on only one region, race, or denomination lack. African-Americans, whose religious experiences during the war are still not very well understood by historians, received a whole chapter’s worth of analysis. This is an important contribution to scholarly understanding of this important period in African-American Christianity. While many studies tend to focus on anti-war elements in the Catholic Church, Wesley shows that northern Catholics’ opinions on the war were just as diverse as other denominations. While brief, his analysis of Catholics during the wars is one of the best and most insightful since John McGreevy’s *Catholicism and American Freedom* (2003).

Though Wesley loses sight of the Catholic Church in his epilogue, his conclusion nevertheless succinctly explains the war’s impact on post-war ministerial authority. He shows how the decline of ministerial power in the North was related to increasing secularization in that part of the country. Finally he persuasively explains the continual strength of African-American ministers who served as political leaders among their people after the war and the important role that southern white clerics played in creating the “Lost Cause” ideology that helped other white southerners to rationalize their section’s all-encompassing defeat in 1865. *Politics of Faith* is an important contribution to the growing body of scholarship on faith during the war, which will be useful to scholars of American religion, partisan politics, and the Civil War.

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