

The Civil War as a Theological Crisis

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Review

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Noll, Mark A. *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*. University of North Carolina Press, \$29.95 hardcover ISBN 9780807830123

The Civil War's Impact on Faith and Religion

Few historians have failed to recognize the significance of religion in the American Civil War and the sectional crisis that led up to it. Numerous exercises in Civil War historiography have focused on the experiential and institutional dimensions of mid-nineteenth-century American religion, exploring topics such as prewar transformations in denominational structure, wartime revivals in the camps, the nature of popular piety on the home front, and the role of chaplains in military and diplomatic service. This book concentrates primarily on the place of religious ideas, especially ideas related to the discipline of biblical interpretation, in the American conflict and its aftermath. According to Noll, the cultural crisis of the Civil War also constituted a crisis for theology (6).

One of America's premier church historians, Mark Noll is a leading authority on American intellectual life and a respected advocate for a culturally engaged evangelicalism in contemporary society. His magisterial *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (2002) is now a standard in the field. Long associated with Wheaton College in Illinois, home of the Billy Graham Center and the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, Noll currently holds the Francis A. McAnaney Chair in History at the University of Notre Dame. His work in U.S. religious history, well known for its original contributions to the study of the Reformed tradition in America, has been deeply enriched by collateral interests in the Canadian religious experience and evangelical-Catholic relations. That same attention to internationalism and ecumenism helps to make *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* a distinctive piece of Civil War scholarship.

Originally designed as a set of lectures for audiences at Penn State University and Union Seminary in Virginia, the book's chapters address four

main themes related to the theological crisis of the Civil War: the Protestant-Enlightenment synthesis at the core of mainstream nineteenth-century American theology, the controversy over biblical approaches to slavery, the debate over biblical perceptions of race and racism, and the application of nineteenth-century models of Providence to the interpretation of political and military events. Two additional chapters present a sampling of commentary on these issues from Canadian and European Protestant writers and comparable observations from Roman Catholic leaders in North America and Europe.

Despite occasional references to the beliefs of ordinary people, the book is principally geared toward the analysis of published books and articles from clergy, editors, and academics. Hymnody and fiction enter into the discussion only minimally. Jewish perspectives provide intriguing counterpoint to what is predominantly an intra-Christian conversation. Representative figures whose works receive significant degrees of coverage include Brown University president Francis Wayland, Andover Seminary professor Moses Stuart, Baptist activist James Pendleton, church historian Philip Schaff, Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell, African Methodist leader Daniel Coker, Canadian statesman Agenor Etienne de Gasparin, British journalist Goldwin Smith, American Catholic writer Orestes Brownson, and contributors to the Jesuit journal *La Civiltà cattolica*.

Throughout the book, Noll handles his period sources with respect and impartiality, evaluating each of them according to criteria of clarity and originality but never early twenty-first-century moral assumptions. His skillful review of the arguments over slavery in the Bible dramatically reveals the full range of concerns and viewpoints that animated antebellum investigations into the topic and fueled sectional strife. Noll gives special attention to authors, largely ignored in their own time, who labored to distinguish ancient Israel's non-racist, religiously inclusive slavery from the enslavement of Africans and their descendants as practiced in the Americas. One of the most valuable features of the book is its examination of foreign theological opinion on U.S. slavery and the Civil War itself. Noll's research demonstrates that many Canadian and European Christians not only dismissed proslavery biblical apologetics but also criticized what they perceived to be dehumanizing tendencies in the North's commitment to consumer capitalism.

Noll is most provocative as he reduces the Civil War's theological crisis to a crisis of religious authority. Other studies have argued that Protestant insistence

on biblical inerrancy, articulated by Charles Hodge and Princeton Seminary colleagues, and Catholic endorsement of papal infallibility, officially defined at the First Vatican Council, jointly represent an unprecedented turning point in post-Enlightenment Christian history. Noll persuasively makes the case that the inability of nineteenth-century American theology to solve the religious problem of slavery was directly related to its uncritical appropriation of Enlightenment values such as democratic individualism, pragmatic voluntarism, and common sense rationalism. His contention that the same weaknesses that prevented American theology from settling the national debate over slavery ironically advanced the secularization of American culture in the years after Appomattox invites further research.

This slim set of lectures greatly enhances the study of religion's role in the American Civil War and the study of Christian intellectual life during a crucial period of U.S. history. Scholars in both fields will profit especially from its pioneering research into Christian Europe's varied reactions to the American Iliad and its causes. Advanced students and discerning general readers will appreciate the book's lively prose and its suggestive conclusions.

Peter A. Huff holds the T. L. James chair in religious studies at Centenary College of Louisiana and is currently a resident scholar at the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Minnesota. He is author of Allen Tate and the Catholic Revival (Paulist Press, 1996) and What Are They Saying About Fundamentalisms? (Paulist Press, 2008).