

No Peace for the Wicked: Northern Protestant Soldiers and the American Civil War

Robert Welch

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Welch, Robert (2009) "No Peace for the Wicked: Northern Protestant Soldiers and the American Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol11/iss4/6>

Review

Welch, Robert

Fall 2009

Rolfs, David *No Peace for the Wicked: Northern Protestant Soldiers and the American Civil War*. University of Tennessee Press, \$38.95 ISBN 9781572336625

Seeking Heaven in the Face of Hell

The rising importance of social history in the study of the Civil War era has added new frames of reference that aid in understanding the actions and beliefs of soldiers serving on both sides of the war as well as the society that shaped them. Within the last decade religion has become one of the fastest growing areas of this new research, with works by Steven Woodworth, Mark Noll, Harry S. Stout and others delving into concepts of faith, morality and the service in the face of civil conflict. David Rolfs seeks to build directly off the arguments of several of these authors at various points in his work through a study of the role of Protestant Christianity among Union soldiers and the post-Second Great Awakening environment that formed their beliefs. Rolfs' discussion of religion among Federal soldiers centers on the analysis of archived letters and diaries representing both major theaters of the war, as well as soldiers from numerous states. While it can be rather easy to find mentions of God in these documents through a casual search, the author lays out in his words a "subjective" methodology to establish his sample, relying on the individual's use of Christian language to determine if a soldier deserves the title of "Protestant Christian" (xviii). It is important to note that Rolfs does not make a broad claim that the majority of Union soldiers were Protestant Christians. According to his research and the works of others that he cites, the author places the number of soldiers actually on the rolls of a Protestant church at approximately ten to fifteen percent while placing the total number of Christian believers serving in the army at around thirty percent, thus mirroring American society as a whole (xviii). The rigorous work that Rolfs put into the development of his methodology, as well as the time necessarily spent in archives to find the letters of these Christian

soldiers and the works of such ministers as Henry Ward Beecher, makes this book of interest to the social historian of the Union army.

No Peace for the Wicked delves into the various questions one would expect when discussing religion and military conflict such as: how soldiers merged their religious beliefs and the expectations of military service; the role of belief in the decision to join the army in time of war; and how soldiers interpreted the nature of God's will when they engaged in combat or otherwise faced the hardships of army life including disease, hard campaigning, and living among non-believers. Just as in civilian life, these men dealt with issues such as backsliding in the face of secular pressures, as well as issues of faith when confronted with the brutal nature of combat and the human cost of civil war. Through the examination of his large sample of letters and diaries, Rolfs allows the reader a rare insight into the hearts and minds of those struggling through some of the darkest hours in American history. Additionally, the author takes on such issues as the idea that the Civil War was some form of divine judgment upon the United States for its sins, both North and South (133). In this form, Rolfs discusses the idea of civil war as holy war, an important question to consider if some soldiers used this concept to justify their service in the North's cause (129-133, 208-209).

In many ways Rolfs assumes a limited background in certain areas of scholarship on behalf of the reader, and as such there are several digressions in the book that some might find helpful. There are two separate areas discussing the religious history of the United States within chapters two and four, and an additional digression on the development of a just war concept and the changing nature Federal war policy in chapter four. The latter digression seems oddly out of place within the framework of the particular chapter in which it appears ("For Family and Country"), as well as the book as a whole. The discussion of what constituted a just war appears to be a rebuttal to Harry Stout's *Upon the Altar of the Nation* (2006), with Rolfs placing the impetus of changing policy with the writings of Emmerich de Vattel (61). While the discussion is interesting *per se*, and of value to those who are researching the changing nature of Federal military policy toward the South, the discussion seems to have little bearing upon the nature of Christianity as practiced by the author's sample soldiers, unless these men studied making war at West Point. Rolfs does attempt to make a connection between just/hard war and the collective societal memories of Europe's religious wars, but the connection seems tenuous (66).

While discussing the relationship between Protestant Christianity and the political nature of the Civil War, the author uses a language that some might find troubling. In evaluating the mixture of politics and religion in support of the growing Federal war effort, and especially the concept of becoming a martyr for one's country, Rolfs uses the word "heresy" to describe what he calls a growing "civil religion" in wartime America: "If some theologically naïve common soldiers embraced this heresy, however, at least part of the blame lies with their clergy and their political and military leaders, who occasionally promulgated or tacitly approved this unorthodox vision of religious martyrdom" (83). Heresy is also used to describe the antislavery martyrdom concepts behind Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" at pages 135-136. While the idea of blending religion and civic patriotism or the symbolism involved in an abolitionist anthem might well be heretical in the eyes of the orthodox Christianity of post-Second Great Awakening America, the intent of the language used by the author is vague enough to make one wonder if Rolfs is viewing these examples through the lens of period religion for the sake of argument or if the author might be passing judgment on these deviations from orthodox faith.

Despite the above examples, Rolfs' overall work is an informative read, giving new insights to the religious world of the Federal soldier during the Civil War and the society that shaped him. It should provide an interesting addendum to the library of anyone researching the role of religion as part of the overall experience of the mid-nineteenth century and who wishes to understand the motivations, compromises and conflicts of faith faced in the midst of America's bloodiest and most challenging conflict.

Robert Welch is a Ph.D. candidate in Iowa State University's Agricultural History and Rural Studies program. His dissertation investigates the wartime changes in Georgia agriculture and the role of agriculture in Sherman's Savannah Campaign of 1864.