A Visitation of God: Northern Civilians Interpret the Civil War

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Review

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Seeking Religion in the Civil War

Sean Scott's *A Visitation of God: Northern Civilians Interpret the Civil War* examines how civilians in the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa understood the meaning and reality of the Civil War. Scott chose this region to study because a diverse mix of immigrants from New England, the Middle Atlantic States, the upper South, and Europe settled the region during the antebellum years, leading to "a heterogeneous society that resembled 'an ethnic checkerboard' more than the 'proverbial melting pot'" and civilians in this region disagreeing profoundly over slavery and the justness of the Civil War (5). His second reason is that there are relatively few studies of this region compared to the South, New England, and the Middle Atlantic States. After examining a large number of letters, diaries, newspapers, and church documents, Scott concludes most of the population of this region (which I will refer to as the North) believed "that God providentially controlled history" (4). His sources are constantly trying to figure out God's reasons for putting the country through the ordeal of the Civil War, and what the war's many twists and turns meant. Despite the diversity of opinion on God's purposes and plans for the Civil War, a dominant and hegemonic voice emerges—that of the mainline evangelical churches, the Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and some smaller groups. The denominational leadership, and much of their laity, early and easily reached a consensus that, not only was the Union right politically, but also in a divine and sacred sense. Disagreement with wholehearted support for the Union cause meant contradicting the will of God and committing treason. Scott's purpose, however, is not to illustrate the mainline evangelical perspective but to criticize it for disrupting Christian unity by betraying its fundamental mission of saving souls and providing Christian fellowship for their members by their often

crude and chauvinistic practice of denouncing and excluding dissenters and the blurring of what he believes should be essentially separate realms of church and state.

Anyone familiar with the Union's reasons for fighting the Civil War will be familiar with the gist of what the evangelical churches were saying. Scott gives example after example throughout the duration of the war of northern civilians justifying their waging of the war as carrying out God's will, merging the cause of the Union with the cause of God. The United States had, from its founding, been a sacred nation based on the sacred notion of liberty, and the Confederacy's willingness to tear it apart had to be crushed, even if that meant bloodshed. A Presbyterian minister in Cleveland, soon after the firing on Sumter, concluded a sermon by proclaiming that "the consecration of ourselves to our country's service, may be the noblest service we can render to our Redeemer and our God" (24). As the war dragged on and it became apparent that a quick Union victory was not going to happen, the northern evangelicals rarely wavered in their support for the war and began arguing that God must be using the war to end slavery. The wealthy Indian Methodist Calvin Fletcher believed that "God... intends...that his African children are to go out from bondage" (51). On many if not most pages of the book, examples of the dominant evangelical viewpoint that support for the union was support for God are found.

Even though most of Scott's study is based on the words of non-elites, he does contrast the dominant evangelical certitude with the skepticism of Abraham Lincoln, who did not believe that man could discern God's purpose. Scott compares Lincoln favorably to the mainline evangelicals, agreeing that Lincoln's skepticism "has justifiably earned him the designation as the war's greatest theologian" (5). In addition to Lincoln, Scott finds numerous examples from his usual sources of ordinary people disagreeing with the view of the evangelical establishment. At every stage of the war, in fact, Scott finds these critics. His method, to a great extent, is to give an example of the dominant God and Union perspective on a particular era in the war and then to follow it with examples of dissenters. From the war's outset, in response to the chorus of support from the north's evangelicals, he finds dissenting voices. He cites the case of John Funk, a congregant of Chicago's Third Presbyterian Church, who found his minister's December 1860 sermon representative of the bloodthirsty attitude he found so troubling among northerners. The dissenters were from a variety of groups and backgrounds, including Democratic politicians and supporters, members of pietistic, perfectionist denominations such as the Quakers and Mennonites, and

disaffected members of the evangelical denominations, often lay members at odds with their clergy. For some, the war *disproved* the notion that America was in any way a divine nation, as Andrew Ingram lamented “Those high expectations of our Country’s future glory, prosperity and renown and her mission as an exemplar among the nations of the earth are—I greatly fear—likely to prove a mere phantasm” (29). The worst part of this, from Scott’s perspective, is that differences in opinion poisoned the atmosphere in some churches, causing them to lose their effectiveness as Christian churches. He provides a glaring example of the Pleasant Run Baptist Church in Rush County Indiana, at which a lay person submitted several resolutions supporting the war effort, including one equating failure “to pray for governmental officials with treason” (187). The ensuing rancor and divisiveness over the fate of these resolutions rendered the church ineffective and toxic for the remainder of the war. Perhaps the most striking example of the divisiveness of politicization was a group of church members from southern Ohio who formed their own church, the Christian Union, in response to feeling alienated by the constant pro-Union and antislavery views expressed in their own churches. The irony of the Christian Union, not lost on its mainline critics, was that, in leaving the established churches because they blurred Republican, pro-Union messages with true Christianity, they created the same kind of church, except they blurred Copperhead, pro-Democratic messages with true Christianity.

Scott’s compelling study is a valuable addition to the scholarship on both the Civil War and nineteenth-century religion, greatly adding to our insight and knowledge about the diverse views expressed by northern religious leaders and lay people on the war. His study is well-researched and brings in many sources that are either original or rarely used by other scholars. As all good works of scholarship do, his book raises a series of questions and issues. While Scott gives some examples of division in the northern churches during the war, perhaps his argument would have been more convincing if he looked more at the years after the Civil War to find evidence of this issue lingering. The issue of the Civil War resonated in politics for much of the rest of the nineteenth century, but I don’t know if it did in the northern churches, at least to any significant degree that stands out. Scott’s ideal of a unified Christianity never existed, at least not in modern times, and in the nineteenth century, American Christianity was becoming more fragmented than ever. Middle- and late-nineteenth-century American Protestantism had already fractured or was in the process of fracturing along North/South lines, theological lines, white/black lines, emotional

revivalism/refined worship lines, modernist/traditionalist lines, and several others. That is not even taking into account the chasm within Christianity between Catholics and Protestants.

Is it fair to criticize or blame the mainline evangelicals for taking such a pro-Union and eventually anti-slavery stand? The churches had been sanctifying the United States since its founding, so could or should the churches have muted their voices about such a threat to something they cherished so dearly? The churches had been wrestling with the slavery issue since the beginning of the United States history, and remained deeply divided over what to do about it even during the war. Many contemporaries, including some cited in Scott's book, and modern historians have blamed the northern churches for compromising on slavery right up until the Civil War, but do they not deserve at least some credit for finally getting it right and becoming abolitionist during the war? Can we credit the mainline evangelical churches for helping to accomplish a truly positive and progressive result—the abolition of slavery—when they only fully embraced abolition as a goal when it became a military necessity? Perhaps Scott has a point that the northern churches he takes to task could have been less heavy-handed and judgmental in how they spoke out on these issues and handled dissent within their own churches. Or, is he implying that they should have stayed out of the fray completely?

A Visitation From God shares important insights with another recent book about the Civil War and religion, Daniel Goldfield's *America Aflame*. Goldfield argues that the evangelical churches inflamed the passions of people in both regions, leading the nation into an unnecessary Civil War. Scott's book focuses on the effects on the churches and Goldfield's on the nation, collectively arguing that the overheated rhetoric of nineteenth-century evangelical religion stirred the waters and nearly tore down the foundation of the early republic. Can the northern evangelicals, for their inflammatory and martial rhetoric, be added to the long list of reasons for the Civil War?

Douglas Montagna is an Associate Professor of History at Grand Valley State University, and the author of two articles on Methodism and forthcoming book to be published by Northern Illinois University Press, From Civil War to Sunday Schools: Midwestern Methodists and their Struggle to Make their World.