

In God's Presence: Chaplains, Missionaries, and Religious Space during the American Civil War

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Review

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Miller, Benjamin L. *In God's Presence: Chaplains, Missionaries, and Religious Space during the American Civil War.* University of Kansas Press, 2019 \$39.95 ISBN 9780700627660

The Catholic chaplain of the Union Irish Brigade, Fr. William Corby, was fond of saying in his journal that they had “*consecrated another spot in Virginia*” as he celebrated worship along the route of their brigade’s marches. Though not mentioned by Benjamin L. Miller in his book *In God's Presence*, Corby’s sentiment captures the essential point of this well-researched book – namely how chaplains and missionaries attempted to recreate (and in many cases create) “sacred spaces” amidst the truly “profane” horrors of Civil War death and suffering.

As America's most deadly conflict, the Civil War affected people (both soldiers and civilians) in profound and powerful ways, not the least of which was being swept up into foreign places and horrific situations completely alien to their previous worlds. Whether in the sheer panic of battle or the often culture-challenging routines of camp life, whether in hospitals or prisons, Civil War soldiers confronted situations which threatened everything they had previously learned or been exposed to. Antebellum religion and faith had provided for many citizens a solid foundation to make sense out of the world they lived in, and its religious leaders (pastors, priests, missionaries) had been the guardians and proponents of those foundational beliefs. But the Civil War was an assault on nearly every aspect of the antebellum world that had provided them security and structure.

In his book *In God's Presence*, Benjamin Miller uses the philosophy of spatial theory as a prism to analyze how chaplains and missionaries in the Civil War attempted to preserve antebellum religious foundations and beliefs (“sacred space”) amidst the foreign chaos of battles, death, wounds, camp life, etc. (“profane space”). In doing so, he presents what is perhaps the most thorough and detailed analysis yet written of the religious life of Civil War chaplains and soldiers. Though thankfully more books are emerging of late which deal seriously with religion and the War, few have dealt as specifically as this book does with the actual religious practices of this long-ignored subject area. Benjamin Miller (no

relation to this reviewer) devotes chapters to such areas as men of the cloth, Christian soldiers, worship practices, and clerical care given in hospitals and prisons. All of these are presented in an extremely orderly, well-documented manner, using many actual diary quotes and copious footnotes from other authors in the subject area.

The author highlights fourteen specific chaplains and missionaries to methodically outline the battles that religious personnel had in fashioning a new religious world adapted to wartime. The chaplains are well-chosen, diverse in work and background – Baptists (Frederic Denison, William Wiatt), Catholics (William Corby, Hippolyte Gache) and all other major denominations are well represented here. Their combined wartime writings illustrate well the challenges of religious “professionals” in the maintaining of continuity in basic religious practices throughout the War. Whether on battlefields, in camps, hospitals or prisons, they labored to bring the meaning and power of Faith to individuals shocked by the horrors of a war that grew more deadly as the years passed. The helpful role of religious literature (both Bibles and pamphlets) is discussed, as is the powerful role that the United States Christian Commission (USCC) played for northern troops in providing sacred space for chaplains and troops. Though not discussed in this book, individual southern churches and towns did attempt in a far less comprehensive way to provide similar services for Confederate troops.

Several areas that *In God's Presence* discusses could be insightful for readers unfamiliar with the field of Civil War religion. The “**profane**” space of the Civil War refers not only the obvious areas of battles, fighting, hospitals, prisons, but also to the most prominent vices which flowed rampantly through the camps of both armies – profanity, alcohol abuse, gambling and card-playing, sexual misconduct and even dancing. All of these were regular and frequent targets of preaching and ministry among many chaplains and missionaries. The powerful role that **religious revivals** had on soldiers in both armies after 1863 is well covered, and indeed is remarkable given its implication of perhaps prolonging the conflict into 1865 (as James McPherson indicates). A brief mention of the 1864-65 rise of “**civil religion**” (defined here simply as the fusing of patriotism and religion) introduces a concept that will mark a major transformation in religion’s role in the larger post-war American culture.

There were less than 4000 chaplains and missionaries who served during the Civil War, but they provided a wide variety of services trying to construct a new religious world for soldiers out of the chaos of battle. The author does a fine job delineating the types of services they offered (funerals, baptisms, communion, worship) as well as the diverse places and conditions they worked in (churches both formal and temporary, hospitals, prisons, battlefields). While some were unfit or incapable, the greater majority

of religious leaders grew and adapted themselves well to the needs and demands of their ministry as the War progressed. Thus, as Miller states in conclusion, “*to the extent possible, wartime religion maintained continuity with antebellum precedents*”.

However, as well-presented as much of the book's material is, two areas of concern emerged in reading this well-organized study. **First**, although the author seems adept in Civil War history and citing wartime sources, his familiarity with nuances of theology and religion seems a bit lacking. The phrasing used to develop and express religious beliefs is at times a little simplistic and misleading. A better handle on the nuances and theological distinctions in America's Christian traditions - which indeed become crucial when analyzing religious practices in the War - would have improved this text. A **second** related but more glaring flaw is the surprising lack of knowledge expressed here about certain Catholic faith practices and beliefs. Several surprising and outright errors exist in the book's text and footnotes which apparently slipped by the editors (e.g. modern Catholic Mass customs, and mis-statements about communion historically being “apart from” Mass).

Along this line, including more than the merest of details about the amazing hospital work of the seven hundred or so Catholic nuns would have added greatly to the author's spatial theory “prism” of the War. These remarkable ladies truly “consecrated” the Civil War's profane space by being both committed religious, as well as women in an “alien” nearly all-male world. Though perhaps minor in the author's overall application of spatial theory to Civil War religious practices, these flaws are still unfortunate in a work of this scope from this publisher. However, they certainly do not detract from the overall value and contribution which *In God's Presence* makes to the world of Civil War history. The author's methodical and well-documented approach – that of defining boundaries between sacred and profane in the religious work of America's most deadly war - is indeed a welcome contribution to an often-ignored subject.

Reviewer biography:

Robert J. Miller is a Catholic priest, pastor of an inner-city Chicago church, and former President of the Chicago Civil War Roundtable. He is a frequent speaker on Civil War religion, author of the acclaimed Both Prayed to the Same God – Religion and Faith in America's Civil War; and currently is doing research for a forthcoming book on Catholic Civil War chaplains. rjcmiller@mac.com