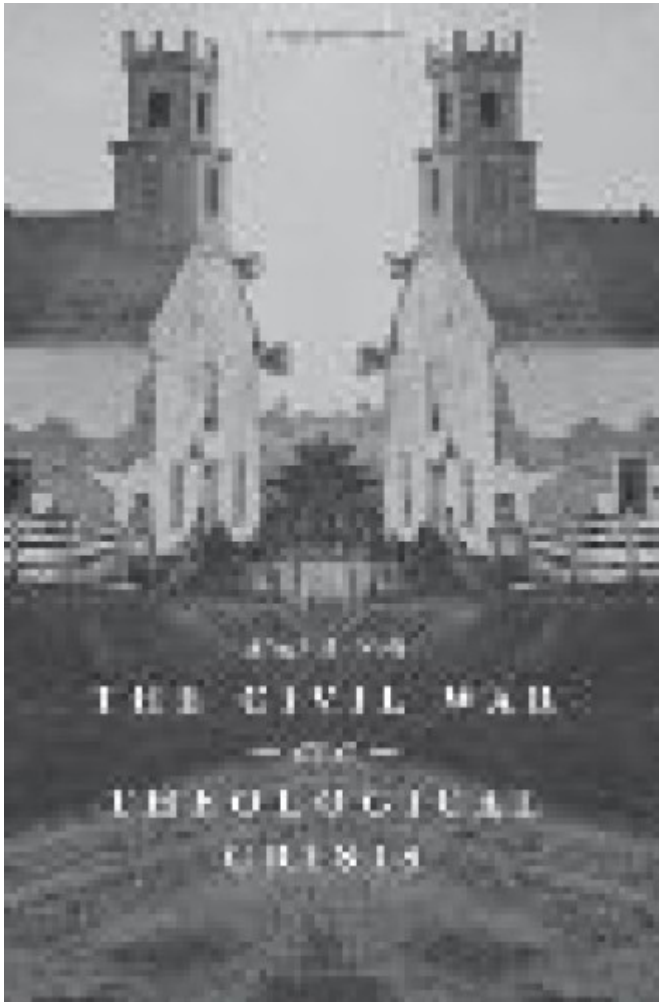


The Civil War as a Theological Crisis

reviewed by [Todd Shy](#) in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

In Review



The Civil War as a Theological Crisis

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In the wake of a tsunami or a suicide attack, most religious leaders hesitate to rush in and justify the ways of God toward humanity. It wasn't always so. As the defining

crisis in American history gathered momentum and became civil war, ministers North and South spoke with authority, even defiance, about the overriding purposes of God. The impact was sobering. Precisely at a time when Protestant influence on national values had no real rivals, America collapsed into a war over the decisive moral issue of the day.

The most astute theologian of the crisis, a layperson named Abraham Lincoln, framed the issue in simple terms: “Both sides read the same Bible and pray to the same God.” And since they prayed for different outcomes, “the prayers of both could not be answered.” In an environment like ours in which the role of religion in public life is energetically debated and values such as freedom are said not to be “America’s gift to the world” but instead “God’s gift to humanity,” the Civil War provides a cautionary tale about the limits of religious belief in guiding a democracy.

In this trim volume adapted from lectures at Penn State, Mark Noll continues the argument he began in his previous book, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. There has never been a period during which America was more unified around a core set of values, Noll argues, than between 1800 and 1860. This antebellum piety was a unique synthesis of republican ideals, Enlightenment assumptions and traditional Christian beliefs. In Europe antiauthoritarian hopes were assumed to sound the death knell of religion, but in the United States republican ideals and Protestant evangelicalism shaped and reinforced each other. That the success of Jacksonian democracy coincided with the spread of Methodism and revivalism is no accident. And yet on the eve of the Civil War, Noll shows, this evangelical consensus became “divided against itself,” fueling the larger conflict. If democracy as practiced in the nation could not work, neither could the faith that shored up its legitimacy. The political crisis, in other words, was necessarily a theological one, because theology and republicanism shared the same rhetoric.

The key to the antebellum synthesis—and, for Noll, the heart of the problem—was a widespread belief in a commonsense approach to the Bible. A faith available to all had for its authority a book accessible to all. The Bible yields its plain meaning to the believer. And so if the apostle Paul commanded, “Slaves, obey your masters,” and told a Christian slave to return to his master, no sophistication was needed to see that the Bible condones slavery. “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” Jefferson wrote of the nation’s founding ideals, and Noll sees the same democratic instinct guiding biblical understanding. No bishop or Harvard scholar was needed to tell the unordained evangelist or even the man in his cabin reading the Bible by firelight

what the Bible does and does not say.

But common sense applied to morality as well as to understanding the Bible. To some, including many readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the moral reprehensibility of slavery became more and more obvious, and the simplicity of an individual verse less decisive. Stowe's novel was powerful because it showed the limits of a morality shaped by exegesis alone.

The ensuing theological crisis was in some ways, then, a battle between moral common sense and exegetical common sense. Those who wanted to criticize slavery and still honor biblical authority could separate out larger principles or themes (love of neighbor, say) and then use those principles to frame specific problem texts. But this interpretive move was usually seen either as a slippery slope (such "methods of interpretation will get rid of everything," one observer noted), or as an undemocratic, elitist exercise (only a theologian could work out these interpretations). Religion is "too simple," abolitionist Gerrit Smith declared, "to make the training of a theological seminary necessary for those who teach it." Contemporary debates over homosexuality often reenact this antebellum dilemma.

For churches and theologians, then, the Civil War was an interpretive crisis. Noll frames the stand-off eloquently:

There were no resources within democratic or voluntary procedures to resolve the public division of opinion that was created by voluntary and democratic interpretations of the Bible. The Book that made the nation was destroying the nation; the nation that had taken to the Book was rescued not by the Book but by the force of arms.

More problematic in the long run than the question of slavery (what theologian today would defend it?) was the issue of providence. Religious leaders on both sides assumed that the war was God's will. A leading northern theologian, Charles Hodge, was representative: "That it was a design of God to bring about this event cannot be doubted." In the South, a Methodist minister rallied an audience with the claim that his region's cause was "the cause of God, the cause of Christ, of humanity." But as Lincoln noted as early as 1858, simply acknowledging God's providence was the easy part: "There is no contending against the Will of God. . . . Still there is some difficulty in ascertaining, and applying it, to particular cases." Lincoln's uneasy approach to understanding how cataclysm could demonstrate God's purpose forms

the climax of Noll's earlier *America's God*. In *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, Noll again reveals his astonishment that Lincoln could offer such a probing portrait of an Almighty who has his own purposes while, in contrast, the country's "recognized religious leaders offered a thin, simple view of God's providence and a morally juvenile view of the nation and its fate."

The Civil War showed the frailty of the consensus of antebellum Protestantism. Common sense can describe a group's approach as long as members of the group reach common conclusions. Where there are divisions of interests and experience, however, what is plainly and obviously right to one may be despicable to another. As the U.S. became more complex, either theology could become more complex too or Christians could lash themselves to an earlier vision of simplicity that was, as Noll shows, a hybrid of republican and biblical values.

In responding to this crisis, Noll suggests, European critics of American theology acknowledged problems such as racism and economic self-interest more readily than did their American counterparts. Noll is particularly drawn to conservative Catholic critiques, which make for some jolting examples. He describes the work of one French critic this way: "The elements that set his work apart from Protestant parallels—especially the treatment of Catholicism as the long-term friend of liberty and his challenge to capricious biblical interpretation—constituted a distinctively Catholic contribution." One waits for a polite rejoinder that doesn't come.

"Catholicism as the long-term friend of liberty"? A German critic also declares the Catholic Church a bulwark of human freedom and gets a pass. And surely Orestes Brownson confuses the usual meaning of the word *liberty* when he claims that "popular liberty can be sustained only by a religion . . . speaking from above and able to command." If Catholicism's critique of American Protestantism is important, as Noll claims, it is not because Catholicism has been a better steward of liberty but because it poses an alternative to a boundaryless individualism.

But there are other alternatives, and readers of Noll's new volume owe it to themselves to seek out chapter 21 of his previous book, *America's God*. There he presents a more searching critique of antebellum piety through the melancholy perspectives of Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville and Abraham Lincoln, a triumvirate "aloof from the organized Christianity of the United States" but attuned to the spiritual dilemmas occasioned by the war. All three present indigenous critiques of a piety that comes too easily and a knowledge of God's purposes that comes too quickly.

One way to move on from the antebellum consensus of simplistic biblical faith is to say that uncertainty and disagreement form an occasion not for submission to some larger authority “greater than the individual interpretation” but for charity among individual interpreters. The individualistic energy of America doesn’t have to be valorized by a republican gospel, but it can be embraced as an opportunity for the development of other virtues. Forbearance in the face of disagreement makes for its own kind of unity, one worth not fighting for.