

# When theology ruled

by [Stephen J. Stein](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

Few pastors would dare to announce a sermon series on "theology" these days, since few of their parishioners would tolerate such an intellectual subject. However, E. Brooks Holifield challenges us to examine the central role played by Christian theological ideas in our nation's early religious history. Holifield, the Charles Howard Candler Professor of American Church History at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, delineates with precision and remarkable insight the development of Christian theology in America from the time of settlement until the Civil War. He ranges across traditions, denominations and intellectual movements and discusses in depth the theological contributions of the leading religious thinkers of the time.

Though he's not the first scholar to engage this task, Holifield takes the enterprise to new heights. His book will become a standard reference work for students in seminaries and religious studies programs, as well as for religious professionals. Christian laypeople who seek insight into their own denominations and traditions also will find the book invaluable.

Holifield's central insight involves his identification of "evidential Christianity," a preoccupation with the reasonableness of Christianity that most early-American theologians shared. His account of evidential Christianity begins with a discussion of the ways in which the Calvinist clergy in early New England balanced human reason and biblical revelation. And he situates the Calvinist origins of American theology within the broader context of the Atlantic world. Those early New England Calvinists, extending from Thomas Hooker and John Cotton in the 1630s to Jonathan Edwards and Jonathan Mayhew more than a century later, initially brought their theological ideas from Europe, and they remained in conversation with European philosophers and Christian theologians.

This transatlantic dimension of early American theology--one of Holifield's primary themes--was especially evident in the massive impact on American theologians of the inductive reasoning process associated with Francis Bacon, the Elizabethan thinker. The philosophical conduit for Bacon's influence was the commonsense

realism of the Scottish philosophers, who argued against metaphysical speculation and the skepticism of David Hume. Scottish commonsense philosophy became dominant in American Protestant circles in the first half of the 19th century.

The widespread impact of "American Baconianism" was evident in antebellum religion across denominations. Its proponents applied the principles of rational evidence and proof to the Bible, with special attention to prophecy and miracles, as well as to the authenticity, authority and interpretation of biblical materials.

The impact of American Baconianism was also evident in the responses it elicited from theologians--ranging from the Lutherans and Roman Catholics to transcendentalists and others influenced by Romanticism--who adopted alternative approaches. Holifield analyzes the theological views of the Lutheran Samuel Simon Schmucker, of the Roman Catholic bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick, of the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, of the liberal theologian Horace Bushnell and of others who departed from the tradition of Baconianism.

Holifield ends by describing how the debate over slavery in antebellum America raised new questions about the evidential approach, with pointed implications for the issue of theology's practicality as well as the place of the Bible in theological reflection. The impasse over slavery also had direct significance for the future course of American theology. It set the stage for new developments in post-Civil War theology--perhaps Holifield's next research project.

One of the book's significant subthemes is Holifield's affirmation of the prominence of the theological enterprise in early America. The absence of competing respected vocations (at least before the formation of the new nation) gave theologians great status. Holifield does acknowledge the presence of populist theologians who rose from the ranks of the culturally disfavored, the poor and the uneducated. They asserted alternative theological principles, but their numbers were modest compared with the ranks of educated theologians. Among the religious traditions shaped by such populist leaders were the Methodist and the Mormon. The growth of such movements in the past century and a half may account, in part, for the sense of distance between our religious world and the theological world described by Holifield.

Some readers may flinch before the erudition displayed in this volume. But *Theology in America* is a book that can be read either in its entirety, with all elements of the argument falling into place, or chapter by chapter in pursuit of an understanding of

particular figures, traditions or denominations. Holifield's chapter on Jonathan Edwards rivals for clarity any single essay ever written on the theology of that pivotal 18th-century evangelical. His account of the theological views of the Hicksite Quakers, the Shakers and the Mormons gives their religious ideas an integrity equivalent to that of the Calvinists. His discussion of confessional Lutheranism pays attention to an often overlooked tradition in the history of American religion. The many years of research invested by Holifield in this project have paid huge dividends. We have come to expect the highest quality scholarship from him, and he does not disappoint us.