

## WHY THEOLOGY NOW?

MARK A. NOLL

Department of History, University of Notre Dame

E-mail: mnoll@nd.edu

---

Paul Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Gregory S. Jackson, *The Word and Its Witness: The Spiritualization of American Realism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009)

Peter Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Andrew Finstuen, *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009)

David F. Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

The five books reviewed in this essay testify to the vigor of an unlikely subspecialty in contemporary historical writing. In this day of ever more extensive religious pluralism, the American story of Christian theological development might look like a barren field with nothing to harvest of general interest or existential relevance. The refutation given to this supposition by these books—each solid in its own way, yet each quite different from the others—is convincing. One achievement, by highlighting specifically theology as a shaping force in American history, is to present a convincing picture of “religion” as more than just a reflexive social or cultural construct. Yet they also do more. Each also suggests, or at least hints, that the theological developments under consideration also matter as theology itself—that is, for the pertinence of their questions about God and the world in relation to God.

The books are, thus, making large claims about “religious meaning” in two senses of the term. All of them argue that religious beliefs exerted a basic influence on other dimensions of American history—while of course acknowledging that the beliefs were also being shaped by political, racial, economic, gender, partisan, and other this-worldly influences. But several of them also imply that the

“religious meanings” they document as historical factors deserve to be considered as spiritual or nontemporal matters in their own right. None of the volumes is in the least proselytizing or apologetical, but their pages seem often to open questions going beyond simply historical assertions.

In so doing, these books provide indirectly what a recently published posthumous volume by John Patrick Diggins broaches directly.<sup>1</sup> Diggins answered the question of his title, *Why Niebuhr Now?* first by criticizing loose, sloppy, or partisan evocations of Reinhold Niebuhr and the ethical insights found in his overtly theological works. “Why Niebuhr now?” is Diggins’s way of asking, “What are Barack Obama, John McCain, and other public figures trying to do through well-publicized but not very precise references to someone who died in 1971 and who had been largely incapacitated by illness for many years before that?” But Diggins’s title also carries a second meaning that asks what Niebuhr’s opinions about God and the world might mean for explicitly religious purposes, and not just for their relevance to the foreign and domestic politics of the United States. Although Diggins did not live to flesh out this part of his argument, he seems to say that the need for Niebuhr *now* goes well beyond advice for the purposes of policy to guidance concerning transcendence, or perhaps the consequential absence of transcendence.

Three of the books reviewed here manifestly share a similar dual interest—both to improve understanding of the past and to heighten religious sensibility in the present. All five agree that theology has been a neglected category in narrating American history and that this neglect has resulted in distorted understanding of a past that was filled with obsession about God. They are also alike in according a very large role to the multiform preoccupation of American Christian movements of all kinds with the Bible as revelation from God. Differences in the books’ apparent interest in the two related questions—why is the story of theology relevant for American history? Why might theology be important for Americans now?—establish a progression for individual consideration of the books.

\* \* \*

Paul Gutjahr’s full biography of the nineteenth-century’s leading Presbyterian theologian, Charles Hodge, and Gregory S. Jackson’s effort to relate the communication strategies of American evangelicals to the outworking of American literary realism appear most obviously restricted to the historical meaning of their subjects and least concerned about their contemporary religious significance. Gutjahr may harbor convictions about the possible continuing relevance of Hodge’s understanding of Scripture and the confessional Calvinist theology he advocated through his long career. But his book is limited to a

---

<sup>1</sup> John Patrick Diggins, *Why Niebuhr Now?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

sympathetic account of the personal life of this surprisingly sociable public theologian, a competent survey of Hodge's noteworthy theological positions, and a briefer report on the conservative corners of the American landscape where Hodge's conception of Christianity remains alive.

Gutjahr, a professor of English at Indiana University and the author of a superb book on the printing and distributing of Scripture in early US history, provides the first substantial biography of Charles Hodge (1797–1878) since the life published by Hodge's own son shortly after the theologian's death.<sup>2</sup> As a professor at Princeton Seminary from 1822, Hodge taught theology to over three thousand seminarians, which meant that over those years he instructed personally more “graduate” students than attended any other American institution of postbaccalaureate education, with the possible exception of Andover Theological Seminary. Gutjahr's study helps restore Hodge to the central place he enjoyed in the nation's nineteenth-century learned culture. As the leading and longest-serving Calvinist theologians in a period when theology could still function powerfully in public discourse (see Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address) and when Calvinism remained the theological position that all alternatives had to address, Hodge's opinions mattered.

In lengthy articles written for the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, which he edited for more than forty years, and also in a number of substantial books, Hodge provided an always thoughtful, and to many readers an unusually persuasive, rendering of traditional Calvinism. After spending two years of intense theological study in Europe as a young man, Hodge wrote learnedly for the rest of his life about European developments. As a Presbyterian leader during a period when his denomination, though outnumbered by Methodists, Baptists, and eventually Roman Catholics, supplied the nation with some of its most articulate public intellectuals, Hodge played a key role in opposing both the schism of 1837–8 that divided Presbyterians into Old School (more traditional) and New School (more activist) factions, and then also the reunion (1868–9) of the northern New School and Old School factions. In a period when individuals of high estate and low took biblical interpretation very seriously, Hodge and Moses Stuart of Andover Seminary dueled each other in a widely noticed debate over the meaning of Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Hodge's position, as summarized neatly in Peter Thuesen's book, was a firm belief in what he read as the clear message of Scripture: “Adam was the federal head of all humanity, who received his guilt by imputation; Christ died for the elect only, who received his righteousness by

---

<sup>2</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1880). A sign of Hodge's continued relevance is the fact that a second well-researched biography was published late in 2011—Andrew HOFFECKER, *Charles Hodge: The Pride of Princeton* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011).

imputation.”<sup>3</sup> With Edwards Amasa Park, also of Andover and the era’s most capable advocate for New England Congregationalism, Hodge engaged in two great controversies—a protracted argument over whether Congregationalists or Presbyterians did a better job maintaining the theology of the revered Jonathan Edwards; and a concentrated debate in 1850–52 over whether theological language was primarily representative (Hodge) or substantially figurative (Park). The latter exchange was sparked by a provocative essay from the Hartford Congregationalist minister–theologian Horace Bushnell, which David Holland’s *Sacred Borders* treats as a turning point in American attitudes toward scriptural revelation.

Hodge wrote several much-noticed articles on slavery, which he felt the Bible did not condemn as such but which in its present-day southern manifestation was doomed to pass away. Because he held that just-war principles ruled out preemptive warfare, he was at first a lukewarm supporter of the Union cause, but he became an enthusiast for Abraham Lincoln and the North as the Civil War progressed. A moving essay published shortly after Lincoln’s assassination offered one of the few public words, besides Lincoln’s own, to question the ease with which so many Americans identified the hand of Providence in the course of the war. Hodge’s close ties to his brother, a pioneering Philadelphia obstetrician, and his own curiosity about the natural world encouraged him to think that contemporary scientific discoveries should influence theological conclusions. He held, for example, that convincing geological discoveries compelled Bible believers to abandon traditional interpretations of Genesis concerning the age of the Earth. But he balked at Darwinism because of Darwin’s depiction of “unguided” biological change that Hodge considered an assertion of cosmic randomness implying no need for God. Yet Hodge also asked that Darwin’s travel books be read aloud to him as he lay dying.

If Gutjahr is a reliable guide to Hodge’s thought, he is even better in conveying a sense of the theologian’s basic humanity. Hodge sustained an unusually large circle of close friendships with teachers, students, fellow Presbyterians, and others that included Joseph Henry, who moved from the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University) to found the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. He was an attentive husband to Sarah Bache Hodge, a great-granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin, and then to Mary Hunter Stockton Hodge, whom he married after Sarah’s death. With his children, grandchildren, and other family members he was revered as open, pious, accessible, and supportive. For easy access to his study in his house, located adjacent to the main seminary building, he had a special hinge installed for the purpose of making it easier for the children to

---

<sup>3</sup> Peter Thuesen, *Predestination: The American Career of a Contentious Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 180.

pop in and out as they pleased. Whatever else Gutjahr achieves, he succeeds in depicting Hodge as an attractive human being.

Yet beyond noting that Hodge's three-volume *Systematic Theology* and several of his commentaries on the Pauline epistles are still read in some conservative Calvinist circles, Gutjahr does not directly take up the question "why Hodge now?" From what he supplies, however, a reader might be able to hazard a guess: Hodge's unwavering commitment to the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense that he had learned as a student in the 1810s at Princeton College and Princeton Seminary has harmed his reputation among contemporary students.<sup>4</sup> Not only was Hodge's epistemology more atomistic than his own nearly mystical sense of God's presence with believers, it also ill fitted him to deal with the romantic and evolutionary epistemologies that grew stronger as the nineteenth century progressed. His life, however, did show that the predestinarian Calvinism of the Presbyterians' Westminster Confession could inspire a warm and loving personality, that it was possible to maintain a strong belief in biblical inspiration alongside academically informed practices of biblical interpretation, and that a responsible Whig view of energetic government meshed easily with a conservative biblical theology. As depicted by Paul Gutjahr, in other words, Charles Hodge may still have something to say in the present.

Like Gutjahr, Gregory Jackson is a professor of English who does not comment directly on the contemporary religious significance of his well-researched religious history. But unlike Gutjahr, whose biography is intended for as general an audience as possible, Jackson writes for readers who are at home with the verbal pyrotechnics and broad intellectual ambitions of contemporary cultural studies. His first paragraph, thus, begins with a mid-eighteenth-century commentary by Jonathan Edwards on the biblical book of Hebrews, leaps to a violent video game depicting the Second Coming of Christ, and in passing sets out a complex thesis about the "narratological and mimetic import" (2) of a distinctly Protestant and Bible-centered cultivation of the imagination.

The ambitious scope of Jackson's research takes in a wide-ranging set of cultural phenomena—the effort in eighteenth-century evangelical revivalism to make spiritual realities intensely present through the imagination; a long tradition in American homiletics to use sermons as the prime vehicle for creating such imagined spiritual realities; a similar concentration on imagined experience as a key tool employed in the late nineteenth century by authors of popular religious literature, leaders of the Social Gospel, and important exemplars of American literary realism; and a continuing deliberate evocation of imagined spiritual experience in popular manifestations of contemporary

---

<sup>4</sup> Criticism on this score appears frequently in *Charles Hodge Revisited*, ed. John W. Stewart and James M. Moorhead (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

evangelical Protestantism. In Jackson's reading, an "aesthetics of immediacy" (31)—a practice of "visualizing the word" (26)—rose to prominence with the image-laden preaching of eighteenth-century revivalists like George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. It then became a leading feature of the nineteenth century that drew evangelical Protestants together, despite their many differences of doctrine and church practice. This spiritually charged style of communication was then put to use by novelists like Louisa May Alcott, whose *Little Women* Jackson reads as updating the literary techniques of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* for a modern age of sentiment. A little bit later, with more secular purpose, social reformers like Jacob Riis used photography and text to convey an image of urban deprivation. When borrowed by literary realists like Stephen Crane, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser, the same imaginative devices moved readers of their novels and stories to see and feel the realities they described. These are the same techniques that Jackson perceives as digitized by contemporary evangelical purveyors of video games.

As Jackson describes this genealogy, a key initiator was Jonathan Edwards, who used Lockean sensationalist epistemology to move his hearers to feel the torments of hell and harmonies of heaven. Charles Sheldon of "what would Jesus do?" fame (*In His Steps*, 1896) guided readers' emotions toward the downtrodden and also instructed them on how the right kind of sympathy could lead to the right kind of charity. Jacob Riis's "spiritual realism" (263) worked to the same end in a more secular mode. At every stage, the reliance on imagined reality required careful attention to media—preaching, reading, photography, video. Jackson shows that skillful users of these media encouraged individuals to become active as participants in God's dramatic plan for humanity. Bible stories, with their potential for typology, were always a rich vein to tap for garnishing the spiritual imagination.

Jackson's conclusion reminds students of contemporary media that their account of images today would benefit greatly from more awareness of "older heuristic traditions" (284). In Jackson's view, such awareness would show how "affective modes of reading and interpretation," with genealogies stretching far into the religious past, still provide "the vital mechanism for the individuals' spiritual self-transformation and . . . a catalyst for spiritual and communal identifications" (284).

Beyond the numerous historical insights provided by his book, Jackson does not seem eager to address the question "why visualizing the word now?" While Jackson several times refers to William James's assertion that the ultimate value of faith is richer experience in the present, he uses James more as observation than as injunction. It is not clear, in other words, whether Jackson thinks imagined spiritualities represent a flight from, or a doorway into, what is truly real. He depicts his protagonists as all working harder at stimulating evocative mental

pictures than at parsing problems prosaically. He may think that this attention to imagined spiritualities contributed to a thinning of selves begun by revivalists and now carried on by video gamers; it may be that they open a way to the divine that purely descriptive, scientific, analytical, or phenomenological usages have unnecessarily closed.

It might be coincidence, or perhaps a commentary on the variety among disciplines in the modern academy, but the professors of English whose books are under review appear more reserved about the religious meaning of their subjects than the professors of history and religious studies to whose books we now turn. Like the studies by Gutjahr and Jackson, their volumes brim with insights illustrating the historical riches awaiting those who take theological contentions, arguments, and applications seriously. But each of these books also goes on to suggest that the theological history they explore may pose existentially significant questions as well as provide historically informative insights.

Peter Thuesen's history of predestination breathes life into what many might consider a musty subject. The belief that human salvation depends on God's choice (his predestining) has a long history in Western Christendom. It was strengthened during the Protestant Reformation and remained a central conviction in the faith that Puritans brought to New England and later Scottish Presbyterians carried to the middle and southern colonies. In unusually economical prose, Thuesen ably sketches that prehistory, with special attention to Saint Augustine, who in the early fifth century provided the crucial ancient formulation of the doctrine. But most of the book, apart from detours to explore eighteenth-century disputes among British Protestants, concerns the American story. Thuesen expertly surveys the lineup of those who held firm for predestination (Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, several prominent Baptists in the nineteenth and also the early twenty-first centuries) as well as the many religious and secular figures who found the doctrine abhorrent. If anything, he is even better at setting those disagreements into broader religious, social, political, and cultural contexts.

Thuesen thus explains how, while all leading Puritans affirmed predestination, they expounded the doctrine with surprising variations that depended on temperament and setting as well as on individual convictions. He explains why the doctrine suffered in the era of the American Revolution when themes of republican liberty undercut all notions of supreme sovereignty. Predestination was the teaching of historical Protestantism that most exercised the United States' exotic array of newer Christian movements. Significantly, the Mormons, Adventists, and Christian Scientists who led the charge against predestination in Thuesen's book reappear in David Holland's study as among the most creative advocates of an open biblical canon.

A particular highlight of Thuesen's *Predestination* is its treatment of earnest and creative women like Catharine Beecher, who, with considerable personal anguish, eventually abandoned the doctrine that her father, Lyman Beecher, had struggled to preserve by adjusting it to the democratic tendencies of the new republic. Thuesen displays his mastery of inside theology by showing how debate over this doctrine dominated intra-Lutheran and Lutheran–Calvinist disputes for much of the late nineteenth century. For the recent past, he describes the strong comeback that predestination has made among resurgent Southern Baptist conservatives and a few prominent preacher–theologians in the North. His survey's great success is to outline the convictions of all participants clearly while also explaining the inner logic that, as examples, moved some anti-Calvinists to link defenders of predestination with ethical antinomianism (if the redeemed are elect by God, why bother with morality?) and with Islam, even as Calvinists denounced anti-predestinarians as closet Roman Catholics and naive perfectionists.

Apart from its expert historical survey, the book also provides a clear answer to the question “why is considering predestination important now?” Throughout the book, Thuesen develops a thought-provoking argument that the key theological division in Western Christian history has not been between defenders of divine sovereignty and proponents of human free will, but between Christian communities keen to define the divine–human relationship exactly and Christian communities defined more by sacramental practice than by precise doctrines. In Thuesen's phrases, “there are two larger ways of being religious—two forms of piety, two religious aesthetics—that have existed in tension in Christian history . . . In place of predestinarianism's mystical awe before God's electing decree, sacramentalism cultivates mystical wonder before the power of priestly ritual” (6–7). While Thuesen does not oversell this argument, it recurs at strategic points. Thus, when Harriet Beecher Stowe, like her sister Catharine Beecher, gave up the family's ancestral Calvinism, Stowe did not embrace an anti-predestinarian defense of free will, as Catharine did. Rather, she turned to the reassuring sacramentalism of moderate Episcopalianism as a way of both leaving behind the precise theology in which she had been raised and continuing on with much of its ethos, seriousness, and devotion. Again, when American Lutherans ended their internal quarrels over which of their number had slid into “crypto Calvinism,” it was more because they all could agree on the efficacy of a Real Presence in the Lord's Supper and the salvific character of baptism than because one particular view of predestination carried the day.

Andrew Finstuen's study of “original sin” in American popular culture after World War II is both creative and convincing. His argument features the well-known figures of his subtitle, but then goes well beyond them to a general conclusion about the postwar years. Historians and journalists, according to Finstuen, have mischaracterized postwar America as a time of cultural captivity,



with religion functioning mostly in priestly fashion to sanction “the American Way of Life,” especially in the global Cold War against communism. Finstuen acknowledges that this characterization is partially correct, but also argues that a great deal of realistic prophetic religion remained at work during this period. To make that case he examines three figures who were among the era’s best-known public intellectuals (Niebuhr, Tillich) and public preachers (Graham). For each, he finds a strong commitment to some form of the traditional Christian doctrine of original sin—the teaching that humans are born with a self-destructive bent predisposing them to favor their own self-interest over the well-being of others and the graciousness of God. For his headlines Finstuen also finds that this doctrine played a large role in creating the broad public influence that each enjoyed. At first blush the thesis seems preposterous since the gap between Graham, on the one side, and Niebuhr with Tillich, on the other, appears too wide. Yet Finstuen’s extensive research shows that despite important differences of intellectual style and theological commitment, the three really did say something reasonably similar about humankind’s inherent flaws and about the serious repercussions in all spheres from the reality of original sin.

Finstuen argues for a second important point that goes well beyond the three religious figures. With a particularly innovative examination of their popular writings, their many speaking engagements in popular venues, the coverage they received in mass-circulation periodicals like *Time* and *Life*, and the large correspondence they received (and often answered), Finstuen proposes a larger statement about the status of lay American religion in the period. Against the stereotype of placid cultural conformity, Finstuen contends that more was going on in this “age of anxiety” than self-protective suburbanization and rampant careerism. In addition, substantial segments of lay America were in fact taking very seriously the limitations, failures, estrangements, and inherent weaknesses of life. The most creative aspect of the book is Finstuen’s convincing account of a broad American attachment to precisely the original-sin emphases of the three popular religious figures. His conclusion is convincing, in turn, because of the innovative use he makes of the personal files left by the three figures, which overflow with evidence of many kinds for the wide lay echoes their work evoked. He is also convincing about an important turn of the tide that occurred in the mid-1960s. With the death of Tillich, the semiretirement of Niebuhr, and the rise of other popular revivalists to share Graham’s previously unquestioned leadership among evangelicals, an important transition occurred that moved much of academic and lay religious thought beyond its preoccupation with original sin. Now it became the sins of others—the government in Vietnam, the oppressors of women, the radicals destroying “Christian America”—that took center stage.

Finstuen is a revisionist for each of his figures. In his account, Niebuhr appears not just as a proponent of international realism but as an effective

communicator preoccupied with sin and grace. Tillich is not just a recondite theological philosopher but a moving preacher of classical Protestant doctrines translated into a twentieth-century idiom. And Graham is not just the naive revivalist but a careful religious thinker with more depth than his clean-cut folksiness and rapid-fire pulpit delivery implied. Finstuen supports his reading of these three with careful attention to other popular figures of their era, like Bishop Fulton Sheen, C. S. Lewis, Martin Luther King Jr, and John Updike, who also shared a concern for original sin and classical Protestant understandings of grace.

Finstuen does not sermonize in addressing the question “why original sin now?” But much in the book shows how clearly Finstuen agrees with the conclusions drawn by his protagonists. His chastisement of what he describes as sloppy history about the postwar commitments of lay Americans amounts also to an endorsement. That endorsement is Finstuen’s apparent conviction that human limits and human sinfulness are realities that deserve attention before both God and humanity in the twenty-first century, even as they did in the postwar era.

David Holland’s *Sacred Borders* not only makes a major contribution to the religious, cultural, and legal history of early America, but also has much to say about the ongoing relevance of his subject. That subject is the surprisingly persistent American debate on whether the canon of Scripture is closed (that is, with no more uniquely authoritative divine revelation expected once the Bible was complete) or open (that is, with more such revelation from God still possible). The book’s first success lies in indicating how many different important groups, well-known individuals, and forgotten but interesting actors busied themselves with this subject. Holland sets the background by pointing out that the Christian Scriptures themselves, with a New Testament added to an Old, provided a defining example of adding fresh revelation to what had gone before. The list of Americans who expended their energy for or against the possibility of further revelation is amazingly lengthy: from all of the early Puritan leaders, through Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin, James Madison and Tom Paine (and Paine’s many literary opponents), Quakers and Swedenborgians, Mormons and Transcendentalists, Catholics and Seventh-Day Adventists, progressive Unitarians like William Ellery Channing and conservative Presbyterians like Charles Hodge. If such figures and groups are well known to historians of American religion (though not necessarily for what they had to say about canon questions), other figures whom Holland introduces are not, like Nimrod Hughes, the author of “hot-selling prophecies” (96) in 1811 that offered visionary explanations for the earthquakes and comets of that year as signs of a soon-coming apocalypse. In Holland’s account, the career of Horace Bushnell, the notable Congregationalist minister from Hartford, was particularly important. In a work from 1858, *Nature and the Supernatural*, Bushnell advanced the possibility of an open canon along with intimations that perhaps he himself

was a vehicle for further divine revelation. According to Holland, Bushnell's career marked a shift from a long period when the notion of a closed canon was dominant—though challenged by many exceptions, nuances, and subtleties—to a much more broadly contested free-for-all that involved all manner of theists, and not just Christian theists, who debated the means by which God speaks to humanity.

One of the ways Holland defends the broader significance of his subject is by describing a connection between biblical hermeneutics and constitutional reasoning that many Americans perceived in the early national period. He shows that reasoning about the Constitution at the time of James Madison, who used disagreements over the canon of Scripture to argue for religious freedom, as well as many other arguments about the same topic from the time of the Puritans to the era of the Transcendentalists, frequently returned to canonical questions in order to gain leverage against opponents in political debate. The connection depended upon widespread belief in both the final authority (closed) of Scripture and the ongoing activity of Providence (open) in directing human affairs. Debates about what God's divine sovereignty meant for the possibility or impossibility of further revelation dovetailed neatly with parallel debates concerning the relationship of a definitive Constitution and the potential for its later amendment. At key points, Holland also brings his story into the present by referring to religious bodies like the Mormons who defend the continuing possibility of divine revelation and some liberal Christian denominations that treat acceptance of gay marriage as resulting from God's ongoing "amendment" of his scriptural original.

Of the five writers considered here, Holland is most direct in explaining why his subject, beyond its historical importance, is religiously pertinent now. After suggesting that debates over the biblical canon point to the complexity of ideas about God in early American history, at a time when such ideas affected almost all theoretical and practical spheres, Holland reflects more generally on the limits of any historical investigation when it approaches questions of the deity. In his own words, "The most difficult question for historians engaging a religious past is what to do with God. No presence is more prominent in the stories early Americans told about themselves and more frequently absent in the histories . . . we write about them" (217). His entire project can be read as a plea for historians who are probing the nation's religious history to treat such issues with at least empathy, if not more.

\* \* \*

Criticisms that can be made of these books do not undercut their significant contributions. In general, all of them could have gone further in situating the theological convictions under consideration in their particular places, times, or ideological environments. Paul Gutjahr could have done more to explain

Charles Hodge's ideas against the great shift from republican uncertainty to self-confident nationalism that took place during Hodge's theological career. Gregory Johnson could have been clearer in showing that Jonathan Edwards repudiated much of John Locke's overall religious vision, even as he exploited bits of Locke's sensationalist epistemology. Peter Thuesen could perhaps have explained why Canadian and Scottish Calvinists modified their understanding of predestination differently than did their American contemporaries. Andrew Finstuen might have explored at greater length the significant differences among his major figures in their stance toward biblical accounts like the resurrection of Christ—Niebuhr (ethical), Tillich (mythical), and Graham (literal). David Holland perhaps rushed past important intervening developments in the effort to show how debates of the seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries on the extent of the biblical canon anticipated contentions of the twenty-first century. Other readers will doubtless find other aspects of the books to challenge.

Yet taken as a whole, they represent remarkably solid historical work, even as they offer a nuanced ideological challenge to conventional secular attitudes. Whether spiritual imagination, conservative Presbyterian theology, predestination, original sin, or the limits of the biblical canon, these apparently esoteric issues turn out to be interwoven with much in the American past that most historians regard as anything but esoteric. The extensive research that is expertly presented in these books demonstrates the relevance of theology to, among many other things, vehicles of mass communication, moderate antislavery, nineteenth-century intergenerational strife, post-World War II popular culture, and constitutional law. One answer, therefore, to the question "why theology now?" is simply that so many able historians, approaching their tasks from so many angles, have proven how fruitful careful attention to theological history can be for so many aspects of the American past.

The other way of answering "why theology now?" requires consideration of theology itself. Peter Thuesen's account of why predestination lost its plausibility with many American Christians is built on solid documentation referring to shifting national, economic, political, and psychological attitudes. But he also pauses to comment on what he calls "the modern tyranny of 'proof in religion'" (217) that deflated what for generations of Christians in several ecclesiastical traditions had been a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a captivating and terrible mystery.

David Holland addresses even more directly "the basic dissonance that exists between a humanistic discipline and a transcendent subject, between the field of inquiry most interested in change over time and the realm of thought most committed to eternal verities" (217). Holland can cite contemporary instances where historians have complained about professional peers being overly eager to treat spiritual categories as more basic than the political, social, psychological,

or economic—and also an increasing willingness of others to make the reverse critique. He concludes that countercriticisms like these are entirely positive in making “us aware of the deep complexity endemic to the human experience” (217).

More, however, seems to be at stake than just “deep complexity” for Holland and Thuesen, probably for Finstuen, and perhaps for Gutjahr and Jackson as well. Together, these authors share the empathy for first-order religious questions that have been addressed in different ways by others, including atheists, in a surprisingly rich vein of historical writing—by, for example, signal works from earlier in the twentieth century by Joseph Haroutunian, H. Richard Niebuhr, Perry Miller, E. S. Morgan, Henry May, and Daniel Walker Howe;<sup>5</sup> by contributors to the booming historical industries centered on Jonathan Edwards and Martin Luther King Jr;<sup>6</sup> and by a considerable number of other first-rate works that have recently appeared.<sup>7</sup> Yet in these books there are hints of more than just empathy. They can be read as suggesting, albeit in extreme variety, that theology is important now because careful historical work makes it easier to credit—even in an age obsessed with self-fulfillment, captivated by the idea of biological determinism, and anaesthetized by entertainments—the *sensus divinitatis* and the divinity inspiring that sense.

---

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Haroutunian, *Piety versus Moralism: The Passing of the New England Theology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1932); H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1937); E. S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958); several essays in Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956); Henry F. May, “The Recovery of American Religious History,” *American Historical Review* 70 (Oct. 1964), 79–92; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, eds. Perry Miller, Harry S. Stout, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957–); and as a leading example, George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992–); and as a leading example, David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> As only a few examples: Heather D. Curtis, *Faith in the Great Physician: Suffering and Divine Healing in American Culture, 1860–1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Mark Valeri, *Heavenly Merchandize: How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); George C. Rable, *God’s Almost Chosen People: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); David D. Hall, *A Reforming People: Puritans and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (New York: Knopf, 2011).