

SCRIPTURE AND SLAUGHTER: THE CIVIL WAR AS A THEOLOGICAL AND MORAL CRISIS

LEWIS PERRY

Department of History, Saint Louis University

Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006)

Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2006)

In a well-known 1964 essay on the “recovery” of American religious history, Henry F. May observed that some scholars had “revived” religious interpretations of the nation’s greatest political crises, including the Civil War. But there was more work to be done. “A religious, or partly religious explanation of the Civil War,” May suggested, would “rest on two assertions: that serious and intractable moral conflicts were important in causing the war and that in nineteenth-century America such conflicts were particularly difficult to avoid or compromise because of the dominance of evangelical Protestantism in both sections.” In fact, both the importance of the moral conflict over slavery and the role of evangelicalism in intensifying hostilities were already attracting attention as historians reexamined previous emphases on economic factors and political bungling as explanations of a tragically unnecessary war.¹

The two books under review here could be read as more recent statements, though surely not the last words, on the same moral conflict and intractable hostilities. Mark A. Noll, in a collection of lectures on the controversy between proslavery and antislavery theologians, links the Civil War to “a public deadlock that was caused or strongly supported by conflicting interpretations of the Bible” (160). Harry S. Stout views the Civil War itself as an “immoral war” (xxii) in which religious leaders of both the Union and the Confederacy too often failed to hold political and military leaders and populaces to traditional moral

¹ Henry F. May, “The Recovery of American Religious History,” *American Historical Review* 70 (Oct. 1964), 81.

guidelines. Both books treat the failures of evangelical religion preceding and during the war as leading to major changes in cultural and intellectual values, but they conceive of these changes differently. For Noll, the Civil War “took the steam out of Protestants’ moral energy” and marginalized orthodox Christian influence in American public life. For Stout, the war’s consequence was the merger of religious themes and political ideals in a patriotic civil religion that “has continued to sacralize for its citizens the idea of American freedom.” It is an open question whether the two authors’ accounts may converge—did the creation of the “religion of a sacralized patriotism” bear some responsibility for the marginalization of orthodoxy?

* * *

In *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, as in previous works on the biblical argument over slavery, Noll acknowledges a “deep but also complex intellectual debt” to Eugene D. Genovese, who, together with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “opened up this subject in a truly remarkable way.” In a 1985 lecture Genovese focused serious historical attention on the somewhat discredited proslavery biblical argument—its evolution, variations, strengths, failings, major role in unifying Southern belief, and eventual place in the demise of slavery in the United States. So long as the defenders of slavery addressed the history of ancient Israel as precedent for the South’s peculiar institution, they held sounder ground than abolitionists who dismissed the reality of Old Testament slavery. On the absence of legal marriage for slaves and the treatment of black women, antislavery polemicists had the better of the scriptural argument. Both sides long erred in oversimplifying social relations in the ancient world as “either slaveholding or bourgeois” as though Israel “had to have resembled either Mississippi or Massachusetts.” In summing up, Genovese adopted the metaphor of a match or battle. The opponents of slavery had lost “the theological and historical war,” but not without scoring “some impressive victories in particular battles.” After militant secessionists entrusted the fate of slavery to divine providence as determined on the battlefield, however, intellectual victory would become irrelevant.²

In some later writings Genovese referred more enthusiastically to the “fearful drubbing” proslavery clergy gave their antislavery opponents.³ Most recently,

² Eugene D. Genovese, “*Slavery Ordained of God*”: *The Southern Slaveholders’ View of Biblical History and Modern Politics* (24th Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture, Gettysburg College, 1985), esp. 7–9, 19–22.

³ Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Front: History and Politics in the Cultural War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 155. See also 37.

in an erudite reexamination of the “mind” of the Southern master class, Genovese and Fox-Genovese made their strongest and most general claim: not only did the abolitionists fail to “make their case” for slavery as sin, but even present-day churches that proclaim slavery’s “sinfulness” cannot “come close” to grounding antislavery doctrine in Scripture. Antiracism is another matter, and the Genoveses reject slavery on other grounds. But they insist, “To this day, the southern theologians’ scriptural defense of slavery as a system of social relations—not black slavery but slavery per se—has gone unanswered.” As the Genoveses note, Noll does not go that far but instead believes that antislavery theologians could have “done better” if not constricted by the racism, common-sense intuitive moral reasoning, and biblical literalism of their historical era.⁴

Noll has also adopted the military metaphors. In a stimulating 1998 essay, he described proslavery advocates as having “largely succeeded in winning the Bible.” A few pages later, however, he was more balanced: “If at our late date we might conclude that, within the interpretative framework of the period, proslavery won the exegetical battle, no Bible-believing abolitionist would admit it.”⁵ In a recent review he offers the conclusion, “after several years of pondering some of the same sources the Genoveses use, . . . that the Genoveses are substantially correct. The defenders of slavery did win the argument over Scripture, at least when the argument was narrowly defined—the Bible does not condemn slavery per se.” He adds that the “contrary argument” emanated from “overlapping circles of abolitionists and theological liberals,” whose reasoning

fed currents that undermined not only trust in the Bible, but also traditional doctrines—like original sin, the necessity for a divine Savior, the denial of human perfectibility except at the End of Time and only through the work of the Holy Spirit—that Christians of all sorts had found in Scripture.

It is hard to know what to make of the latter statement. The antislavery ranks, by Noll’s own account, included self-conscious Trinitarians as well as moderates, like the Baptist clergyman and college president Francis Wayland, who sought to develop “a more organic, yet still conservative, hermeneutic that allowed for attacks on slavery along with affirmations of traditional orthodoxy.” After pointing to shifts in official Roman Catholic views of slavery as exemplifying

⁴ Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 526–7.

⁵ Mark A. Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” in Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson, eds., *Religion and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 45, 49.

recognition that “moral absolutes may evolve over time,” Noll reflected that the Genoveses’

carefully documented conclusion that defenders of slavery won the antebellum battle of the Bible can only be disconcerting—both for historians, who especially in recent years have worked hard at describing religion as a positive social force in the American past, and for believers who hold that Scripture is an authentic divine revelation.⁶

These concerns about orthodoxy and Scripture help explain the treatment of antislavery intellectuals and their arguments. In Noll’s lectures “the party of abolitionists” is identified with William Lloyd Garrison and a “few others” whose example biblical defenders of slavery used to show that doubt about the biblical defense of slavery equaled rejection of the authority of the Bible itself. Little is said about Garrison’s actual positions or about the antislavery arguments of other abolitionists, whose reputations formerly benefitted from the recovery of religious history. He does not join historians who have regarded the presentation of new ways of reading the Bible to free it of proslavery interpretation as an intellectual breakthrough. Thus David Brion Davis and E. Brooks Holifield have appreciated the Unitarian William Ellery Channing’s development of a hermeneutic finding in the “general tenor and spirit” of the New Testament principles—especially the golden rule—overruling literal applications of Old Testament law. It was not necessary to be a Unitarian to believe that the Old Testament was not a fixed, final presentation of morality, that God had “seen fit to enlighten our race progressively,” and that principles in the New Testament supported the elimination of slavery.⁷ Some abolitionists believed truth was eternal, some that it progressed in stages. In these lectures Noll says almost nothing about holiness movements and the influential revivalist Charles Grandison Finney, a pivotal figure in many accounts of the emergence of immediate abolitionism. In previous works Noll has pointed to diverse antislavery Christians and moderate emancipationists, whose reasoning, with variations in deference to scriptural tradition, “led to liberal theological conclusions” in the decades before the war

⁶ Mark A. Noll, “A Moral Case for the Social Relations of Slavery,” *Modern Intellectual History* 4/1 (2007), 199.

⁷ E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 497–500; David Brion Davis, *Challenging the Boundaries of Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 50–59. For a Southern Baptist critique of “rigid literalism” in interpreting Scripture on slavery and in general see Ralph C. Wood, “Eugene Genovese and the Biblical Tragedy” (2001), *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 28/1, 12 (available at http://www3.baylor.edu/~Ralph_Wood/misc/BiblicalTragedySouth.pdf).

and “even more so” in later decades.⁸ On the margins of theological controversy were other Northern moderates who felt the Bible was consistent with some forms of slavery but who “rapidly and easily converted to abolitionism once war itself was declared.”⁹ These unionists, as they might be called, who had an important bearing on issues addressed in both books under review and in postwar intellectual life, deserve more study.

Noll has turned to the language of “crisis” to describe unresolvable disagreements among evangelical Christians at the outset of the Civil War. These clashes pitted Southerners against Northerners, of course, but in some cases Northern clergymen who agreed on the Bible’s authoritative voice divided bitterly over emotional issues such as the sinfulness of abolitionism or the condemnation of Africans to everlasting slavery. While moving away from talk of winners and losers, Noll writes less sharply than he has previously done of the “stultifying” effect of prevailing rules of biblical interpretation on the thinking of mainstream Protestant leaders.¹⁰ To explain the regrettable persuasiveness of proslavery biblical interpretations, he now points to “abolitionist overstatement” as shown by contradicting conclusions drawn from Scripture by “the vast majority” of white Americans. Consequently, abolitionists created an impression “in many minds” that opposition to slavery posed a threat to the authority of Scripture (72). That sounds less like overstatement than confrontation with popular error and bigotry. Noll acknowledges that widespread belief in black racial inferiority kept many white American Bible readers from reaching conclusions critical of slavery. Indeed, he lists “an inability to act on biblical teaching about the full humanity of people, regardless of race,” as an unfortunate component of the crisis (73–4). He does not, however, note that the unpopular abolitionist readings of Old and New Testament emphasized (and probably in some eyes, overstated) those doctrines.¹¹

⁸ Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” 51; *idem*, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 398.

⁹ Noll, *America’s God*, 396.

¹⁰ Leaders like Charles Hodge and Robert Breckinridge were kept from asking how the words of the Bible should be understood and “what general principles should be sought in a polity controlled not by a Semitic tribe warring against other tribes nor dominated by Romans bent on ruling the world but in a state where both Constitution and legislation were influenced by eighteen centuries of Christian development and where some of the legislators were themselves Christians.” Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” 61.

¹¹ On antislavery uses of Acts 17:26 see Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 36, 58; and Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 60–63.

“The primary reason,” Noll writes, “that the biblical defense of slavery remained so strong was that many biblical attacks on slavery were so weak.” Antislavery advocates were trapped in a double bind: Direct attacks based on self-evident republican truths and intuitions were “the easiest to refute” (Noll does not explain why or by whom, but most likely he means by proslavery advocates if direct references to the Bible were lacking). “More complicated, nuanced, and involved biblical attacks” on slavery, though “more formidable,” were “much less effective in a public arena that had been so strongly shaped by intuitive, republican, and commonsensical intellectual principles.” Furthermore, when antislavery speakers turned to exegesis of scriptural passages, they met ground rules that precluded appeals to broad principles of justice or natural rights. Thus in an 1845 debate between “two able casuists,” both Presbyterians, the anti-abolitionist spokesman “methodically tied” his opponent “in knots over how to interpret the proslavery implications of specific texts,” while the abolitionist referred futilely to the Bible’s “general principles” and “whole scope.” Such references, repeatedly offered by abolitionists, “almost never found support in the South and only rarely among Northern moderates and conservatives” (40–42).¹² The weakness of antislavery arguments is defined in good measure by their inability to persuade Southerners. It should be noted that some of the antislavery voices found to have held such disfavored or easily refuted positions—think of Francis Wayland or Henry Ward Beecher—were persons with considerable influence and followings in the public arena. As Noll points out, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s immensely popular novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, unfettered by any double bind, mocked narrow text-citing in defense of slavery and presented sympathetic characters acting on “the Bible’s overarching general message” (42–4). This problem is especially puzzling in light of Noll’s explicit goal of understanding the “standpoint” of “the vast majority of Americans” (9–10).

Noll has always been clear that the racism of the proslavery argument weakened its claim to biblical supremacy. Now he develops this theme at greater length. He is emphatic that no passage of Scripture could justify Thornton Stringfellow, one of the most widely read proslavery writers, in thinking that people of “the African race” were exceptionally suited to lifelong enslavement and that their constitutional inferiority was evident “in all conditions and countries they have ever occupied” (62). The South’s most praised clergyman, James Henley

¹² In previous works Noll has given slightly different wordings for “the double burden of staggering dimensions” faced by abolitionist polemicists. In each case, their challenge was to perform a “high wire act” by seeking to advance antislavery conclusions without abandoning “the traditional authority of the Bible” or favoring a “romantic humanism” that would threaten widely accepted hermeneutic practices. See Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” 44; Noll, *America’s God*, 392, 395.

Thornwell, famous for his strict insistence on the doctrine, known as “the spirituality of the church,” that the church should take positions only on the basis of “express revelation” from Scripture, did not hesitate to justify one-race, blacks-only slavery on grounds of “common sense” and “inward” conviction without citing a single biblical text. Noll calls this a “breathtaking performance” in “self-contradictory audacity” (63). Oddly, however, he compares Thornwell’s “audacity” to his least-favorite clergyman Henry Ward Beecher’s prediction that a Bible-reading population would turn against slavery, as though racism were no worse than liberal optimism.

Noll quotes David Walker and Frederick Douglass, among other African American leaders, on the hypocrisy of whites’ uses of the Bible. He adds that, “as might be expected,” African Americans did not limit themselves to biblical arguments any more than white abolitionists did, but to them it was clearer than to any other group that slavery “contradicted the Scriptures in general” (65–6). In discussing black writers who defended “one-bloodism” and “the Gospel of Liberty” with references to Paul’s address on Mars Hill and the Declaration of Independence, Noll does not apply to them the same critical scrutiny as he does to whites (41, 69). He does find some instances of blacks who wrote on Scripture “with patient care” and offered “sophisticated interpretive reasoning” and “theologically powerful argument” (69, 70). Some of these, however, date back to the War of 1812—in other words, to a different era of racial thinking, Bible reading, and theological reasoning.¹³

Two chapters on the writings of Canadian and European theologians about the American biblical war over slavery show how unimpressive the literalistic Bible-quoting contests, Northern racism, and the South’s proslavery defense looked to orthodox Christians in other lands. Noll gives particular attention to the conclusions of Jesuit writers in Rome that the United States faced a crisis over slavery because it lacked moral and religious unity and a “central religious authority” and thus was “doomed to suffer the ill effects of excess democracy, excess republicanism, and excess Protestant individualism” (154–5). How, we might ask, was the moral deadlock related to the rise of American democracy and its bifurcation into conflicting Northern and Southern versions? Was there not some wisdom in Abraham Lincoln’s view, expressed in his Alton debate with

¹³ On the complexities of slavery, the slave trade, the Bible, and “the ideal of interracial human community,” explored through the life of a black New Divinity minister, see John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753–1833* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 83–116. Saillant criticizes (228) studies of the biblical proslavery argument for failing to note that “antebellum biblical arguments for and against slavery took place outside a tradition in which a strong biblically inspired antislavery had already been articulated.”

Stephen Douglas, that slavery was “not only morally wrong, but a ‘deadly poison’ in a government like ours, professedly based on the equality of men,” a toxin “that somehow operates on the minds of men, exciting and stirring them up in every avenue of society—in politics, in religion, in literature, in morals, in all the manifold relations of life”? How exactly might a central theological authority have stopped the damage?

In the absence of any “higher religious authority...than the private interpretation of Scripture,” Noll reflects, “the business of the theologians” was handed over “to the generals to decide by ordeal what the Bible meant” (160). Elsewhere in this and previous works he refers to the “Reverend Doctors Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman” (50). Sarcasm aside, this oversimplification deflects attention from politicians and policymakers and from religious people who debated slavery in their congregations, denominations, and political forums. *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* actually turns to the Civil War only briefly and abstractly in its closing pages. We are reminded that “the war freed the slaves” and conferred “a constitutional claim to citizenship” and that military might failed to supply the “moral energy” needed to implant equal rights and equal opportunity in “the subsoil of American society.” But not much is said about the effects of battles on policy formation and the actions of, among others, abolitionists, missionaries, and the freedpeople. The suggestion that more “intellectual vigor” and moral commitment on the part of evangelical Protestants could have achieved a different outcome seems, at best, wishful (159–60).

Noll also sketches a long-term consequence of theological deadlock and war: “an implicit national agreement” thereafter “not to base public policy of any consequence on interpretations of Scripture” (161). He offers that postwar consensus as a new and important explanation, preceding other social, economic, scientific, or theological ones, for the “marginalization” of the Protestant voice and the “secularization” of American intellectual life. The consensus, in his view, had some beneficial consequences—greater religious toleration and diversity, the avoidance of religiously motivated armed conflict, the continuation of republican traditions. But other consequences were unfortunate:

it has been much harder for deep, religiously rooted moral conviction to exert a decisive influence on the shaping of public life—be it, to take some examples, against unfettered capitalism, against violent ethnic discrimination, for environmental protection, for the unborn human fetus, for equal economic opportunity, or for universal medical protection. (161)

Perhaps these brief reflections on the diminished influence of Protestant theological arguments are best left for individual readers to assess, or we may await further sets of lectures—hinted at how seriously?—on the dilemmas of believers and recurring uncertainties of interpreting Scripture.

* * *

Noll's book clearly meets both of Henry May's criteria for a religious interpretation of the Civil War. In his account, Americans fought over the moral issue of slavery; and the racist assumptions, literalist hermeneutic, and decentralized authority of American evangelism made resolution impossible without the intervention of the generals. Harry S. Stout's *Upon the Altar of the Nation* takes a more traditional view of the war as arising from political crisis and developing over time from "a limited war for 'Union' to a moral crusade for 'freedom' and abolition" (xvi). He is highly critical of the clergy on both sides for failing to speak out against their governments even as the conduct of war became morally indefensible. He devotes relatively little attention to abolitionists or to Northern and Southern arguments about the Bible and slavery.

Stout's few references to the biblical argument concern its uses for propaganda or social control. "Clerical Democrats" in the North "provided their party with the biblical exegesis that supported the proposition that slavery was not a sin" (283). Southern textbooks led children through "the same Bible texts adult theologians argued to justify biblical precedents for the institution" (105). The two books converge in response to what Noll describes as "the hollowness of providential reasoning that was everywhere on display in the War between the States" (92). Stout assembles additional evidence that theologians and secular leaders of both the Confederacy and the Union promoted the view that fighting was holy and victory was certain because God approved their respective central purposes—the defense of states' rights and slavery on the one side, and defense of the Union and, increasingly, emancipation on the other. He highlights the readiness with which Southern ministers abandoned their prewar denunciation of "political preaching" in order to serve a Confederate government that defended slavery and enacted a Constitution explicitly invoking the Almighty God. After reverses on the battlefield, some prominent Northern preachers, most notably Horace Bushnell, conceded that the Confederates' "rhetoric of being a Christian nation was correct," denounced the defects of a "godless" Federal Constitution, and joined in the "clamor" for an amendment invoking God (70). Lincoln's response was to create a national motto for the coinage: "In God We Trust."

Stout has carried out extensive research in sermons, and he provides many quotations to show the emergence of a "jeremiad"¹⁴ for the South and another

¹⁴ The term is taken from the work of Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, and Stout himself. Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

for the North, each proclaiming a sacred national identity, interpreting setbacks as divine chastisement, and observing days of fasting and thanksgiving (and listening to sermons) to maintain morale and unity. Though valuable for social cohesion, in Stout's view, "the rhetoric [of Civil War jeremiads] was pat, the originality nil." In the format they provided, it was "virtually impossible for preachers or moral savants to register judgments of uncertainty or ambiguity" (92–3). The other side was always absolutely wrong, and the preferred response to casualties and destruction was a kind of "de facto fatalism" (92–3). Thus the jeremiads imposed no restraint on the escalating immorality of the war that is Stout's persistent theme.

Stout calls his work a moral history, defined as "professional history writing that raises issues of right and wrong" in the past and, "after painstaking study, applies normative judgments" in the hope that "lessons for life today may ensue." He denies any intention to judge dead individuals who no longer care (though descendants and successors may still care), but readers may feel that he is often judgmental. After some cautionary remarks about the evil and sometimes necessity of war, he proposes to render moral judgments by referring to "widely recognized, long-established principles of just war" (xii). Justifications for war and standards of conduct in war, once declared, have been examined by Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and a succession of Protestant and Catholic jurists and other thinkers, down to the present, who have rejected both pacifism and "amoral realism" and defined ethical principles for wartime. Stout's initial exploration of these principles is relatively brief—just wars must be motivated by self-defense; just conduct must be restrained by considerations of "proportionality" and should not ordinarily target civilians. In civil wars, Stout generalizes, it is often hard to distinguish aggressors from defenders. In the American conflict only war could determine whether the South had a right to secede and whether the North was justified in preventing disunion. Once the war was transformed into a campaign for emancipation, however, from the perspective of "any moral history of slavery," there can be no doubt that "the right side won," though perhaps "*in spite of itself*" (xvi, original italics). This might require further argument. Since he is writing "a moral history of a war," however, he still must investigate the moral misdeeds into which both sides sank. In addition to tradition handed down by saints and philosophers, Stout takes the code of conduct taught to antebellum Northerners and Southerners at West Point as another, related, basis of judgment. It will surprise few readers who have been exposed to anything about the Civil War to find out that all the restraints of philosophy and military etiquette were violated on an escalating scale by both sides.

Stout asks, was the war immoral? Was it just? Surely these questions are too sweeping and oversimplified, though the war did raise a series of significant

moral problems that should be explored one by one.¹⁵ It is hard to present clear conclusions about these problems because of the author's decision to write a narrative reflecting his own research journey and the vicarious experience he invites his reader to pass through. He summons his reader

to follow me and fight the battles as they escalate, and as the generals rise or fall to the occasion; to suffer through the prisons as starving men die in lonely and uncelebrated isolation; to witness the sight of once-proud women whose homes and husbands have been destroyed begging for lowly employment; to imagine women and children being physically removed from their homes and placed in prisons; to recapture the faces of farmers helpless before unchallenged armies massed on defenseless populations, in both North and South, with the goal of root-and-branch destruction. Only when the reader hears the anguished cries of the suffering—My God, why have you forsaken us?—will the full moral dimensions of “America’s costliest war” be revealed for him or her to judge and, in judging, to learn timely lessons for today. (xxii)

Were there no positive or even ambiguous moral experiences to relive before passing judgment?

By Stout’s own account, once he recognized that “the battles had to represent the spine of the narrative,” he depended heavily on James M. McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom* and other familiar works by Allan Nevins, Bruce Catton, and Shelby Foote.¹⁶ This is not a short book, but it can be read as a kind of refresher course on the war’s mounting hardships and destruction. The book’s main claim to originality, however, probably has to rest on the applications of moral judgments, and readers may disagree on their value. Too few Americans in either section “asked hard questions about the morality of war” before it erupted (15). Neither side engaged in “deep moral reflection” at the outset (42). With few exceptions, “moral arbiters on both sides” indulged in “stock rhetorical affirmations” and clichés (97).

As short chapters convey us from one season to the next, the author begins to intervene more directly in the narrative. He asks, for example, “what moral conclusions can be drawn about the history of prisons in the Civil War” (296)? It is always clear that the Emancipation Proclamation and the participation of black soldiers give the Union cause a new “moral meaning” (317). No moralists challenged the mounting slaughter; public opinion was not “morally aghast” (332, 334). As death tolls mounted, “thoughtful men and women did not raise serious questions of scale and proportionality” (338). The generals made “hard

¹⁵ Compare the approach of Michael Bess, *Choices under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

¹⁶ McPherson points to cumulative errors in Stout’s military narrative. James M. McPherson, “Was It a Just War?,” *New York Review of Books*, 23 March 2006, 18.

pragmatic decisions of war” and counted on intellectuals—“chiefly the clergy”—to supply moral justification or else engage in “a conspiracy of silence” (396). In the end, it is hard to sum up what Stout as moral arbiter has demonstrated except that in some horrible way the war was immoral even though it achieved the glorious moral triumph of emancipation.

Abraham Lincoln is central to both horror and glory. According to Stout, the president concluded as early as July 1862 that “total war”—a controversial term used freely here—was justified against the Confederacy’s army and civilians. He “willingly sacrificed traditional moral restraints to strike fear in the heart of the enemy.” When he issued an executive order permitting seizure and destruction of civilians’ homes and property on the same day as the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, this “perfectly symbolized the conjunction of emancipation and total war in Lincoln’s mind” (143). Yet Stout also pays tribute to the “mystical and fatalistic themes” of the Gettysburg address and the Second Inaugural, which he calls “America’s Sermon on the Mount.” Unlike the Puritans’ and abolitionists’ God, Lincoln’s deity was inscrutable and regarded North and South as equally “implicated in the sin of slavery” (425–7). (Actually Garrison and his circle had been saying that since the 1830’s.) Noll similarly praises the rare theological depth of addresses and meditations in which a president with no theological training surpassed the divines. Few other Americans, Noll points out, could “actually agree both that God was in control and that human observers might not know what he was doing” (90).

Stout does not attempt to reconcile the sublime Lincoln with the one responsible for immoral deeds and policies. The president defended Southern civilian hardship as an inevitable consequence of the war their renegade governments chose, and he accepted both sides’ casualties with a conviction that “blood sacrifice would be the ultimate means of creating cohesion and national survival” (407). He was not fully able to discern that the killings had “an innermost consequence” that becomes a major theme of the book: the emergence of “a new religion, baptized and confirmed, imbuing a powerful unified nation-state with the power—and sanctity—of God.” Beneath the carnage, “America was incarnating a millennial nationalism as the primal religious faith” (405). The fasts and holy days had turned Northern and Southern people into “coparticipants” in the war. The clergy’s political preaching had promoted “the apotheosis of ‘patriotism’ into a full-blown civil religion” (248). After his assassination Northern preachers and orators converted Lincoln into “the messiah of the reunited republic” (449) and spoke of nationality as “a compact sealed in blood” (455). Stout himself calls the Civil War “the crimson baptism of our nationalism” and attributes to it “a mythic transcendence not unlike the significance of the Eucharist for Christian believers.” “The incarnation of a national civil religion” he describes as the war’s “final great legacy” (459).

After a passing acknowledgment that some writers associate civil religion with idolatry (xix), Stout adopts a remarkably uncritical view. Having discovered during his research that “something mystical and even religious was taking place through the sheer blood sacrifice generated by the battles” (xxi), he almost forgets the strain of moral condemnation that has run throughout the book. In the end, he does observe that the “new moral logic” of the Civil War led to wars of extermination against American Indians, and he urges readers to demand just conduct in present and future wars, even when they are waged in the name of noble causes. But he loses sight of ambiguities and losses that he has previously recognized. If blood sacrifice really taught Northerners and Southerners that they were one people and one nation, then were the atrocities in some sense justified? Did Southerners generally embrace a civil religion derived from Puritanism? What happened to the “postwar ‘Religion of the Lost Cause’” and the distinctive evangelicalism of the white Christian South toward which earlier chapters point (292)? In a 1952 address on “The Irony of Southern History,” C. Vann Woodward argued that Southerners’ experience of occupation, reconstruction, and grinding poverty distanced them from the almost unexamined “national faith” in unlimited progress and the “illusions of innocence and virtue” that isolated Americans from the outlooks of the world’s other peoples.¹⁷ And how is the glory of civil religion consistent with its exclusion of “the very freedmen and women so many thousands died to liberate”? In the historian David Blight’s telling, reunion tragically imposed a “resubjugation” on many liberated by the war. After quoting Blight in his introduction (xxiii), Stout calls this “the ultimate moral failure of the war.” But in his final judgments on the war, abolition, and America’s “messianic destiny,” he passes quickly over the “tragic perpetuation of racism,” while noting that emancipation “represented the indispensable prelude to equal rights, however long that might take to achieve” (458).

* * *

A significant contrast may be drawn between Stout’s evocation of “an American civil religion that everybody recognizes” (xxi) and Noll’s references to depleted moral energy during the war and declining Protestant influence afterward. Because neither book devotes more than a few pages to postwar religious thought, civil religion and marginalization are not fully described. Still, Noll’s account might be read as warning against any quasi-religious ideology that claims divine favor or prizes nationalistic purposes over biblically inspired conviction. A civil

¹⁷ C. Vann Woodward, “The Irony of Southern History,” *Journal of Southern History* 19/1 (Feb. 1953), 3–19.

religion such as the one Stout hails as the war's great legacy might actually have been barren ground for intense religious faith because, as he states, "for many it enjoys more powerful sway over their lives than the sometimes competing, sometimes conflicting ideas of supernatural religions contained in our nation's many denominations" (459). It is more likely, though, that postwar feelings of loss stemmed from facing new controversies over Darwinism and the higher criticism and experiencing social changes like immigration and urbanization.

Neither of these books examines those issues and problems. Noll's lectures do not, for example, evaluate the contention, made by Timothy L. Smith decades ago and renewed more recently by E. Brooks Holifield, that the biblical controversy over slavery actually prepared Protestants to face challenges presented by German critical scholarship later on.¹⁸ Noll does mention the work of George Fredrickson, Anne Rose, Louis Menand, and other scholars¹⁹ for whom the war led to an exchange, as Noll puts it, of "traditional religious convictions for more secular perspectives" (9). The latter phrase does not do justice to Menand's contentions about a "generational shift" rejecting moralism, dogmatism, and providentialism while embracing uncertainty, democracy, and unionism. In any case, Noll faintly praises that scholarship as significant and provocative but emphasizes the limitations of its focus on "relatively few" intellectuals and upper-class elites. At the same time, he imposes a limitation on his own work in professing to write about "the vast majority" of Americans whose beliefs were not secularized and whose faith was intensified or at least "undisturbed" by the war (9). In other words, he does not challenge or engage with that scholarship but claims to be discussing something else. That claim may fit his previous books, but not these lectures, which do focus on intellectual discourse.

Stout's near-silence on postwar intellectual history is also regrettable because *Upon the Altar of the Nation* might amplify the story of inflexible convictions leading to unremitting slaughter that, in Menand's account, made a less smug approach to civic life look attractive to American pragmatists and their

¹⁸ Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980; first published 1957), 217; Holifield, *American Theology*, 504. Smith's claim that the arguments over slavery spread "a rational and historical approach to the interpretation of Scripture, long before German critical scholarship became a seminary fashion" (217), applies to Wesleyans, perfectionists, and others outside Noll's focus on Protestant orthodoxy.

¹⁹ George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Modern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Anne C. Rose, *Victorian America and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001); and Alfred Kazin, *God and the American Writer* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

contemporaries. It is all the more curious that Stout concludes with a civil religion that might well have made a careful, provisional, tolerant approach impossible for anyone caught up in its sanctification of patriotism. Intellectual historians should find much that is stimulating in Noll's overview of the Civil War as a tragic theological impasse and Stout's portrayal of the Northern and Southern clergy's dereliction of moral responsibility, but the implications for American thought and culture in subsequent decades remain to be explored.