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# God and Race in American Politics

## A Short History

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It does not require extensive elaboration to show that the Civil War—as a conflict to define the Union, determine the legitimacy of slavery, and specify the limits of states' rights—was also fundamentally a religious war fought over how to interpret the Bible and how to promote moral norms in national public life. This judgment was widely and regularly repeated during the conflict itself. So for the North, a sermon of thanksgiving in September 1864 that praised God for the success of Philip Sheridan in laying waste the Shenandoah Valley was entitled "The Bible Doctrine Concerning War." The assertions of the sermon were unequivocal: "We are upon Bible ground, therefore, when we invoke God in doing battle for a just cause, and we are following Biblical precedent when we ascribe to Him the victory. . . . The war which they [southerners] are waging upon the government of the United States is an unholy war, a monstrous conspiracy of crime."[43]

From the South, similar professions—though with the object of God's favor reversed—could be heard until very near the end. In the issue of the *Army and Navy Messenger for the Trans-Mississippi Department* published on March 16, 1865, for example, a die-hard held fast to his faith: "It is not often in the history of the world that such great crises,

involving the very fundamental elements of truth, conscience, and manhood, are allowed by Divine Providence to occur. Such was the position of the Hebrew nation in the midst of the Gentile world; such was the position of the martyr church of Christ. . . . Such is our position now."[44]

The verdict that contradictory interpretations of the Bible fundamentally affected the nature of the conflict was clearly recognized by outside observers at the time. A German editor wrote in 1863, for example, that "from the perspective of the slave question," the War between the States was "a formal war of religion."[45] This same conclusion has been echoed by modern historians who in recent years have begun to explore the religious dimensions of the conflict that had long, but inexplicably, remained underresearched. James McPherson, as an instance, has recently published significant materials supporting such conclusions, as his own view that "Civil War armies were, arguably, the most religious in American history."[46] On several fronts, a growing number of historians are now pursuing research in response to a broad challenge McPherson has posed: "Religion was central to the meaning of the Civil War, as the generation that experienced the war tried to understand it. Religion should also be central to our efforts to recover that meaning."[47]

Religious beliefs and practices were not the *causes* of the war in the way that dispute over the right of states with respect to slavery was a cause. But they were everywhere an overwhelmingly important context for the conflict. Those who take up the challenge to measure the intensifying effects of religion on the outworking of the conflict do not hesitate in their conclusions. Harry Stout is not the only one who has suggested that "with unbroken confidence in God's cause and no comment on [the morality of] man's conduct,



they [the clergy North and South] probably extended the war by a year—the bloodiest year as it turned out."[48]

The fact that religion was so central during the war was a direct result of how important religion had become before the war. Both northerners and southerners, hard-line abolitionists along with hard-line slavery advocates and the many who vacillated in between, almost all had looked for a word from God to resolve their dilemmas about slavery. Many had reached expressly for the written Word of God. This depth of religious conviction helps explain how the Republican administration in the North could succeed in its unprecedented expansion of centralized government authority, first to save the Union and then to exterminate slavery. It explains as well how the classically republican South, with its deep commitment to severely limited government, could allow the central Confederate state to become almost as vigorous as its northern counterpart. It was warfare that allowed deep-seated republican scruples to be set aside, but in this case it was warfare defined as work for the armies of the Lord.

The enduring problems bequeathed by antebellum controversies and by the Civil War itself can be summarized succinctly, however great the complexities to which these problems gave birth. The Civil War, because of principles espoused by radical Republicans and contingencies embraced by Abraham Lincoln, became a war to end slavery, rather than just to preserve the Union. Except for African Americans and a very few white Americans, however, it never became a war to overcome racism.

Before and during the Civil War, advocates on all sides eagerly deployed the Scriptures to defend their own

convictions and skewer the convictions of their opponents. But this deployment was directed overwhelmingly to the question of slavery, only rarely to the question of race (even though the Bible is much clearer in its teachings against racism than it is about its permission of slavery).

Because this public use of the Bible was so prevalent, and also because religious convictions became so strong in support of war efforts North and South, the cause of the North and the cause of the South became religious matters of ultimate concern. In the process, both defending the nation and contending over slavery fed the creation of what Harry Stout has called "millennial nationalism as the primal religious faith."[49] At first this civil religion existed in two versions, one for the North and one for the South. But eventually, as national goals, legislation, and mythology successfully reunited the states, the nationalisms were also unified. Yet as David Blight and other historians have shown, the millennial patriotism and the civil religion that accelerated the reunion of North and South left little energy to address the festering problems of racial injustice.[50]

As a result, when the Civil War decisively settled the questions of national unity and slave legality, and when public religion became the servant of national civil religion, the public use of the Bible became much tamer than it had been before the war. There remained only a small and marginal interest, mostly expressed by African Americans, about what the Bible had to say about racism. And because African Americans were progressively deprived of a public voice in the decades after the war, national politics reflected scant influence from the only constituency that thought it was important to understand the Bible for its message on race as well as its implications for American national destiny.