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Religion, Nationalism, and American Identity: Reflections on Mark Noll's America's God

Abstract

Historian Mark Noll's magisterial America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln was an immediate sensation when it appeared in 2002. Jon Butler, the Howard R. Lamar Professor of American Studies, History, and Religious Studies at Yale University, declared "America's God delineates the Americanization of an Old World Protestantism with a breadth, learning, and sophistication unmatched by any other historian." Noll describes this process of "Americanization" as consisting of a "shift away from European theological traditions, descended directly from the Protestant Reformation, toward a Protestant evangelical theology decisively shaped by its engagement with Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary America." And Noll concludes that this American "Protestant evangelicalism differed from the religion of the Protestant Reformation as much as sixteenth-century Reformation Protestantism differed from the Roman Catholic theology from which it emerged."

This paper will argue that, notwithstanding Noll's considerable achievement, his identification of an "American" synthesis minimizes (although it never denies) the profound sectional variations of that synthesis. In doing so, Noll downplays the ways in which two competing social formations, grounded in fundamentally different systems of social relations, prevented the synthesis from fully uniting "Americans." The different understandings of the synthesis, like the different understandings of its central texts – the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution – reflected the chasm that separated white Northerners and white Southerners and made both groups see themselves as the true defenders of "America's God." Noll's work thus both enriches our understanding of the how most white Americans differed from their European contemporaries, and simultaneously demonstrates the fundamental divide within American national

identity, a divide so pronounced that only a long and bloody war could settle the question of which of the two competing national projects was “God’s America.”

Keywords: Protestantism, religious history, America’s God, Mark Noll, Americanization, national identity, political ideology

Over the years, many students of American Studies have been guilty of Tocqueville abuse. It seems that no matter what the topic, a line or two from Democracy in America perfectly captures the point one wishes to make. But such abuse arises, at least in part, from Tocqueville’s undeniable ability to reveal the heart of antebellum American culture, and perhaps on no topic was he more insightful than on the role of religion in American public life. As he famously put it, there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America” (Tocqueville 303). “In the United States,” he continued, “religion exercises but little influence upon the laws and upon the details of public opinion; but it directs the customs of the community, and, by regulating domestic life, it regulates the state” (304). Such insights – and the penetrating analysis that accompanies them – make the reading and re-reading of Tocqueville rewarding for all students of American Studies, and they also have prompted some of our best scholars to probe a paradox that especially struck Tocqueville. “In France,” he wrote, “I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country” (308). Historian Mark Noll’s magisterial 2002 book America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln represents one of the most important efforts to understand how that intimate and, in important ways, distinctive union between religion and politics arose in America between the Great Awakening and the Civil War.[1]

This paper first briefly sketches out Noll’s rich and complex argument and mentions some of the book’s most important contributions to the study of American history and culture. It will then critique Noll’s failure to explore adequately what he himself repeatedly notes – namely, that “America” did not have “a” God, but that two distinct “Americas” – one Northern and one Southern – had two distinct “Gods.” Noll, who more than any other scholar in the last generation has advanced our understanding of religion, politics, and intellectual life in the early United States, stumbles when having to address the sources of the differences between the sections. His impressive

achievement thus remains not merely incomplete – as all books however impressive must be – but misleading, for although he recognizes that, on a very real level, the Civil War was a religious struggle, he detaches religion from the antagonistic and ultimately incompatible social systems of Northern free labor and Southern slavery that so powerfully shaped “America’s Gods.”

Any attempt to summarize Noll’s elaborate and wide-ranging arguments will necessarily fail to capture adequately the tremendous scope – both chronological and spatial – and breathtaking erudition of the book. But attempt it we must. Noll claims that his focus is theology, but he always insists that theology in America can only be understood by examining its relations with the broader intellectual context in which it functioned, to which it contributed, and from which it borrowed. Noll is most interested in the dynamic interplay between perennial theological concerns – including salvation, the nature of God, sin, and divine revelation – and the ongoing evolution of the new nation, an interplay that had profound consequences both for theology and for the new nation.

Noll divides his big book into five major sections, although these sections are not equal in either length or import. Yet each section speaks to a central concern of his project. His introductory section focuses on Jonathan Edwards, whom Noll portrays as both the greatest theological mind in American history and as, in essence, an Old World thinker who employed new methods, such as Lockean sensationalist epistemology, to old ends, namely the preservation of traditional Calvinist doctrines regarding grace, the atonement, and salvation. For Noll, much of subsequent American theology constitutes an extended effort, respectful but relentless, to grapple with Edwards’s legacy. In this first section Noll also charts what he calls the “final collapse of the Puritan canopy” (31) in the wake of the Great Awakening, increasing religious pluralism, and intellectual challenges such as Newtonian science and Enlightenment rationalism. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Puritan canopy – which had for almost a century provided an integrated system of thought that owed much to traditional European theology – was in tatters. This collapse opened the way for what Noll terms the “migration” of new “ordering concepts, especially notions of republican liberty” and Scottish Common Sense ideas of “universal moral reason” as the bases of a new, evolving “American” theology (44).

The evolution and triumph of this new theological arrangement forms the core of Noll’s critical second section, entitled simply “Synthesis.” This section, although not the longest in his book, is in

many ways the pivot on which the entire book turns, and it presents some of Noll's most important arguments. In some ways, the main argument is quite simple and straightforward: in the thirty or so years surrounding the American Revolution, Americans brought together three hitherto uncombined intellectual currents: republican political ideology, Scottish Common Sense moral reasoning, and evangelical Christianity. The synthesis of these three currents, Noll maintains, developed because of a specific set of historical conditions in British North America and represented "a theological situation [that] differed markedly from Protestant patterns elsewhere" (8). The most curious aspect of "the synthesis of evangelical Christianity with republicanism and commonsense moral reasoning," Noll writes, "is that the United States of America was the only place where it happened" (15). And what makes the triumph of the synthesis even more remarkable for Noll is that the elements of it had been considered incompatible not only to most European Protestants, but also to most Protestants in colonial America, including Jonathan Edwards. Most eighteenth-century Protestants had considered republican political ideas as hostile to Christian orthodoxy, and most had thought that Scottish commonsense philosophy reduced the sovereignty of God and correspondingly elevated human self-sufficiency. The processes by which American Protestant Christians not only accommodated but also embraced republicanism and commonsense moral thought are complex, and Noll is nowhere more masterful than in his careful delineation of how Americans wove together these various and seemingly conflicting strands of thought into a fabric that, by the early nineteenth century, prevailed throughout the country.

The triumph of the American synthesis, for Noll, not only meant that Americans, unlike nearly all Europeans, were committed equally to republicanism and evangelical Christianity, to an "intuitive, universal, natural ethic" (103) and the literal veracity of the Bible, but it also meant that the various elements of the synthesis flowed into one another, so that as religion informed Americans' understanding of government and politics, so too did political thought shape their understanding of God. As Noll puts it, "if a confluence of revivalistic Protestantism with republicanism and common sense moral reasoning helped evangelicals build America, it led as well to the migration of speech about America into their talk about God" (208). The early national project lies at the core of the two middle sections of Noll's book, aptly titled "Evangelization" and "Americanization." Noll traverses familiar ground in the first of these sections, as he details the surge of evangelical Protestantism

during the long "second" Great Awakening and its enormous contribution to the construction of the early republic. "No other organized promoter of values, no other generator of print, no other source of popular music or compelling public imagery, no other comforter and agitator of internal life came anywhere close to the organized strength of evangelical churches" (197). Just as evangelical Protestants conquered America, so did America, Noll contends, transform Protestants. The American revolutionary inheritance, for Noll, made American Protestants suspicious of traditional authority and gave them confidence in the ordinary lay person's ability to know moral truth intuitively, to understand the "common sense" of the Bible, and to participate in the reception of divine grace. Such changes, Noll remarks, "rendered the intellectual assumptions of Jonathan Edwards" – of the authority of traditional sources of wisdom, of the consequences of original sin, of the need for deference toward the clergy, and of God's exclusive agency in the salvation of souls – "foreign to most Americans of the early nineteenth century" (229). Noll states that perhaps the most revealing change in Americans' theological thinking concerned their "assumption that God's rule over the world was best described in terms of 'moral government.'" Noting that this idea had "hardly any currency among theologians outside the United States," Noll concludes "perhaps more than any other subterranean shift in American intellectual life, the appearance of 'moral government' at the heart of religious thought testified to the pervasive interplay between private religion and public morality, between spheres of politics and theology" (290).

The mutually reinforcing processes of "evangelization" and "Americanization" did not produce a uniform, monolithic culture in the late antebellum United States, but they did achieve, according to Noll, a broad consensus of thought. Yet they also both contained ambiguities of meaning and lacked an effective mode or an institutional authority capable of resolving the disputes arising from those ambiguities. The one authority most Protestants recognized – the Bible – proved less than effective at "adjudicating public controversies" (368). Noll's final section "Crisis" describes how the distinct American fusion of religion and politics, of evangelical Protestantism and republicanism contributed directly to the breakdown of the nation. A democratization of biblical interpretation combined with what Noll calls a "Reformed, literal hermeneutic" (367), which appealed to nothing outside of the Bible, allowed white Northerners and Southerners to arrive at fundamentally different answers to the questions of slavery and national destiny. American Protestants thus divided over

the meaning of the Bible, and, Noll notes, the hermeneutic that both Northerners and Southerners employed "could not in itself reconcile the divergent interpretations it had produced" (397). Worse still, the common sense reading of the Bible and the belief that it alone contained simple, authoritative truth created an environment in which "the only possible explanation for an opponent's persistently erroneous use of Scripture was the opponent's malicious intent to pervert the clear word of God" (Noll 379). In what Noll sees as an epic and ironic tragedy, Northerners and Southerners had become "proponents of alternative visions of the same ideology made up of evangelical religion, republican political principles, and commonsense moral reasoning." And, because of that shared ideology, in 1861 "they fell on each other with a holy vengeance" (Noll 368, 371).

For all his insights, Noll presents an interpretation of "American" history that remains far too centered in New England and the New England cultural diaspora. Few will deny that in terms of intrinsic intellectual interest New England did feature some of the most fascinating developments in the years between the Revolution and the Civil War. One cannot fail to appreciate the elaborate and sophisticated ways in which New England theologians grappled with the complexities and dilemmas of adapting their inherited brand of Christianity to the realities of the new republic. But Noll's narrowness of focus excludes both other parts of the country, especially the South – at times almost totally – and the social history or, more properly, social histories, of the various parts of the country, including New England itself. We hear practically nothing, for example, of the profound impact that market forces, industrialization, and urbanization had on the northeastern United States in the decades leading up to the Civil War. While Noll rightly criticizes those scholars who rather crudely reduce the triumph of evangelical Christianity in the North to a cynical means to tame an emerging working class, he neglects to consider carefully the more subtle ways in which these dramatic social developments might have shaped, informed, and transformed the religious beliefs and assumptions of the people experiencing them. Noll's subjects, unfortunately, have no social world beyond the triad of republican political ideology, common sense moral reasoning, and evangelical Christianity. But one surely does not have to embrace a reductionist base/superstructure model to acknowledge and explore the ways in which social relations, workplace conditions, and market forces penetrated peoples' lives and affected their very

understandings of republican political ideology, common sense moral reasoning, and evangelical Christianity. We encounter the subjects of Noll's book as figures within the spectrum his triad creates; they are, as far as we are permitted to see them, beings outside of economies and societies; they inhabit intellectual but not material universes – and the intellectual universes they inhabit have little if anything to do with the material conditions of their time and place. Thus, subjects in Noll's book reside in denominations but not regions; only occasionally does Noll identify a subject's geographic location, suggesting throughout much of his book that place matters little, if at all, for understanding the subject's worldview.

What makes Noll's general neglect of the regional dimension of the story he tells so frustrating is that he himself at times not only mentions that region mattered but also insists that it was of immense significance. At one point, for instance, Noll states that the North and the South "constructed different religions because of the local cultures in which those convictions were incarnated" (177), but he then spends almost no time describing those cultures, the differences between them, or their religious, social, and political effects. Even more revealingly – and, ultimately, frustratingly – Noll asserts that the "driving engines of democracy and evangelical religion were creating not a single Christian America but Northern and Southern versions of the godly republic" (194). And finally, Noll contends that by the eve of the Civil War the shared American "Reformed, literal hermeneutic had helped build a biblical civilization – actually, two biblical civilizations," "two Christian nationalisms" (371).

In these all too infrequent passages, Noll alludes to a difference that conceivably dwarfs the differences he identifies between, say, those who emphasized divine grace over human action in the act of individual salvation. By referring – quite appropriately in my view – to the civilizational differences between North and South, to "different religions," to the existence of two distinct "Christian nationalisms," Noll acknowledges what he does not explore: namely, that something of enormous significance differentiated the two sections. Noll, in a thoughtful and important argument, maintains that the intensity of the war arose, in large part, from the shared convictions of Northerners and Southerners – their belief that they both were defending true Christianity and the national project that they so intimately associated with it. Indeed. Again, Noll is too careful a scholar not to note that "Southern interpretations of republican freedom never became as

democratic, as liberal, or as concerned about individual rights as their Northern counterparts" (217), but he never tries to explain the origins and nature of those different interpretations. In short, Noll ultimately begs the questions: why did Northerners become more "democratic"; why did they become more "liberal"; why did they become more "concerned about individual rights"; and why did Southerners – whom Noll claims inherited the same ideological synthesis as their Northern peers – not become as "democratic, liberal, and concerned about individual rights"? And these questions lead to still others, of far greater historical consequence: why did Northerners of all denominations and notwithstanding the differences that accompanied and created those denominational distinctions, unite to kill Southerners of any and all denominations, and why did many white Southerners believe that Northerners not only had deviated from true Christianity but were also subverting the very foundations of republican government and civil society?

Noll knows that slavery, in one way or another, lies at the heart of the conflict. His chapter on "The Bible and Slavery" constitutes what may be the most succinct and penetrating analysis of how that genuinely American common sense reading of the Bible – as a simple book that was accessible to all – could not resolve the sectional divide over the question of the morality of American slavery. But although Noll can recognize that many Northerners had to acknowledge that a literal reading of the Bible seemed to support slavery, he cannot answer the question of why those Northerners did not then become defenders of slavery and Southerners did. Charles Hodge, Noll's favorite – for good reason – Northern conservative theologian, refused to condemn slavery as a malum en se – an evil in itself – because the Bible denied him that option. But Hodge disproved of slavery, urged Southerners to emancipate their slaves, and voted for Lincoln. To compare his grudging and qualified "endorsement" of slavery with any of a host of Southern theologians' positive embrace of slavery as God's preferred arrangement of capital and labor, as the most Christian solution to the "social question" that increasingly troubled Western civilization, is to miss the ocean that separated the North from the South. Hodge, however respected by his fellow northerners, was, Noll admits, a man on – at best – the outer limits of Northern theological thought. He found himself fighting on all sides to defend the rapidly shrinking influence of northern Old School Presbyterianism, which was being drowned by the tide of possessive individualism and liberal theology that was sweeping much of the North. In the South, however, the theological principles of Old School Presbyterianism

– of a fallen humanity before a supreme and omnipotent God, of a limited human reason in need of divine grace, and of a recognition of the limits of human efforts to alleviate the evils that necessarily haunt the veil of tears that is humans' earthly existence – remained at the center of theological discourse. Noll never explains why the changes in Calvinism that he discusses, changes that produced New School Presbyterians, Unitarians, and liberal Congregationalists – to say nothing about Deists, skeptics, and post-Christian Transcendentalists such as Emerson – were overwhelmingly northern phenomena. Indeed, in his learned discussions of the decline of Calvinism and the growth of ever more liberal theology, Noll focuses nearly exclusively on Northern thinkers – as he must, for Southerners contributed little to those developments. Noll is right to see that these developments transformed the theological landscape in the North, but he never acknowledges the sectional character of those developments. To do so, of course, would require him to identify or at least to entertain the possibility that sectional factors contributed to them. But Noll's triad is national and uniform, not sectional and variegated. Herein lies the problem. Yes, republican political ideology, common sense moral reasoning, and evangelical Christianity were national phenomena. But those phenomena encountered fundamentally different social formations, and the dynamic interplay between those phenomena and those social formations produced strikingly different worldviews. Northern society, based on free labor and increasingly permeated with its concomitant principles of possessive individualism – principles appropriate to a market society, especially personal freedom from the wills of others – proved receptive to a theology that featured a high "estimation of natural human capacity in the process of salvation and a much greater reliance on human energy" – as opposed to divine intervention – "in the reform of society" (Noll 296). Southern society, on the other hand, rested not on wage labor but on the relation of master to slave. That relation – and the society built in large part upon it – inhibited the growth of the idea that to be human meant to be free from the wills of others. It encouraged instead a view of humans as relational, interdependent, and not equal and interchangeable. However extensive market forces were in the slave South, they remained qualified and hemmed in by the non-contractual, non-market-mediated relation of master and slave. That relation not only discouraged the notion that society consisted of an aggregate of free, self-seeking individuals engaged in mutually beneficial choices, but it also rendered white Southerners much less sanguine about human ability – either to achieve their own salvation or to eliminate the ills that plagued fallen man.

Slavery, although they defended it – indeed vigorously promoted it – like no other slaveholding class in the modern world, remained for them what it had been for Augustine: a sign of man's fallen, sinful state. Southern Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell spoke for many Southerners when he stated in an 1850 sermon:

Slavery is a part of the curse that sin has introduced into the world, and stands in the same general relations to Christianity as poverty, sickness, disease or death. In other words, it is a relation which can only be conceived as taking place among fallen beings – tainted with a curse. It springs not from the nature of man as man, nor from the nature of society as such, but from the nature of man as sinful, and the nature of society as disordered. (31)

The more Northerners appealed to natural rights, the more they revealed a reliance on human rather than divine initiative; the more they appealed to a vague and new "spirit" of the Bible over the word and the traditional interpretation of the Bible, the more Southern theologians and lay people became convinced that Christianity itself was threatened by Northern society and the principles that underlie it. What Noll devotes much of his book to is, in short, the process by which Northern – not American – theology accommodated itself to an emerging bourgeois, individualistic, market society. That accommodation found little support in the South, where slavery constricted those elements that had steadily weakened the hold of traditional theology in the North. As the North headed further and further away – in white Southerners' eyes – from tradition, from doctrinal orthodoxy, from the Bible, from nature, and, ultimately, from God, those Southerners increasingly saw their society – a society grounded in traditional conceptions of the nature of man, of the natural relations among the unequal elements of society, of authentic biblical Christianity, and of obedience to divine command – as the last hope for America's God. Perhaps no one expressed the great difference between North and South, between free labor society and slave society, between liberal, humanist Christianity and traditional, biblical Christianity as Henry Timrod, the poet laureate of the Confederacy. In his famous poem, "Ethnogenesis," delivered in February 1861 at the inauguration of the government of the Confederate States of America, Timrod rallied his new countrymen and women by focusing on the vast, qualitative differences that separated them from the "other Americans" to their north. Describing those Northerners, Timrod wrote,

And what if, mad with wrongs themselves have wrought,
In their own treachery caught,
By their own fears made bold,
And leagued with him of old,
Who long since in the limits of the North
Set up his evil throne, and warred with God –
What if, both mad and blinded in their rage,
Our foes should fling us down their mortal gage,
And with a hostile step profane our sod!
We shall not shrink, my brothers, but go forth
To meet them, marshaled by the Lord of Hosts

Timrod then proceeded to contrast the two sides, the two Americas. First the North:

On one side, creeds that dare to teach
What Christ and Paul refrained to preach;
Codes built upon a broken pledge,
And Charity that whets a poniard's edge;
Fair schemes that leave the neighboring poor
To starve and shiver at the schemer's door,
While in the world's most liberal ranks enrolled,
He turns some vast philanthropy to gold;
Religion, taking every mortal form
But that a pure and Christian faith makes warm,
Where not to vile fanatic passion urged,
Or not in vague philosophies submerged,
Repulsive with all Pharisaic leaven,
And making laws to stay the laws of Heaven!

Then the South:

And on the other, scorn of sordid gain,
Unblemished honor, truth without a stain,
Faith, justice, reverence, charitable wealth,
And, for the poor and humble, laws which give,
Not the mean right to buy the right to live,
But life, and home, and health!

To doubt the end were want of trust in God,
Who, if he has decreed
That we must pass a redder sea
Than that which rang to Miriam's holy glee,
Will surely raise at need
A Moses with his rod!

Note how Timrod identifies almost immediately the religious differences between the sections. But note even more strongly how he grounds those religious differences within competing, antagonistic worldviews that reflect the social systems out of which they grew. We owe much to Noll and his landmark, often breathtakingly brilliant book. But in the voices of people like Timrod we hear not what Americans shared, but what made them two distinct peoples. And those voices help us understand why, in 1861, those distinct and incompatible peoples "fell on each other with a holy vengeance" (Noll 371).

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[1] Although this article will examine just one of the most important recent works that explore Tocqueville's insights regarding religion and the development of antebellum American society and culture, other works of note include Brooks Holifield, Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003); Nathan O. Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005); and Mark Y. Hanley, Beyond a Christian Commonwealth: The Protestant Quarrel with the American Republic, 1830-1860 (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1994).



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