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FAITH AND SOCIETY: THE MAKING OF A CHRISTIAN AMERICA

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Mark Noll. *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. xiv + 622 pp. Tables, appendix, glossary, and index. $35.00.

Sitting in Lancaster, Pennsylvania's Long Park for a July 4th concert, I saw a man whose American flag-adorned T-shirt proclaimed "God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in time of trouble. Therefore we will not fear." A few months later, the front page of the *New York Times* carried a headline that announced "Evangelicals Sway White House on Human Rights Abroad."[1] The impact of religion is evident everywhere in our public life, and yet mainstream scholars of American history have been generally reluctant to explore the dynamic between faith and citizenship. Uneasy with how to document spiritual influence, often confusing zeal with fanaticism, authors of texts and monographs ignore what for many Americans has been at the core of their being. Even those who call for a return to the teaching of traditional values often neglect the history of faith. For example, specific references to religion are absent from the legislative discussions of what constitutes "traditional American history" in the valuable "Teaching American History" initiative funded by Congress.[2] Yet the relationship of faith to our political culture is precisely what Mark Noll grapples with in this far ranging and important study, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*.

Noll begins his study with a discussion of "The Long Life and the Final Collapse of the Puritan Canopy," but greatly compresses the early portions of that life in getting to Jonathan Edwards, whose ideas and role mark the true start of the story. Many readers will be tempted to treat this book as an overview of American religious history to the Civil War and to judge it accordingly. Looked at from that perspective Noll's relative neglect of the seventeenth century stands in marked contrast to works such as Sydney Ahlstrom's *Religious History of the American People* (1972) and E. Brooks Holifield's anticipated *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (2003). But Noll did not intend to write a broad survey and he is certainly entitled to begin his story when America is assuming a

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distinct cultural identify and the people's God is being thought of as "America's God." That being granted, the fact that the central theme of the book is how American theology cut itself loose from the religious traditions and beliefs of Europe requires a better understanding of the complexities of earlier American religion than is always demonstrated here. To paint eighteenth-century revivalists as American innovators who "compromised the traditional importance of inherited structures by placing more emphasis on the individual's reception of God's grace than on the individual's place in an inherited ecclesiastical order" seems peculiar at best given the stances that early puritans, Quakers, and Baptists brought to the colonies in the seventeenth century (p. 106). The need to paint a picture with broad strokes and the desire to advance a thesis of Americanization throughout the book lends itself to what some will see as oversimplification of European traditions and their influence on American thought.

The second part of the book focuses on the synthesis that developed between American Protestantism and republican political thought. "Republicanism" has been a much contested concept in writings about eighteenth-century and early national America, and even those familiar with that literature may wish to interrupt their progress through *America's God* at this point to read Noll's appendix on the "Historiography of Republicanism and Religion," which sets forth his understanding of the relationship between the two. In the appendix Noll references the contributions of Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood in his discussion of the evolution of recent scholarship on republicanism, but he doesn't make much of the link they drew between seventeenth-century commonwealth ideas and religion.[3] He focuses instead on J. G. A. Pocock's identification of the classical roots of republicanism and the critiques of Pocock by Joyce Appleby and others before giving his approval to more recent work that seeks to present a nuanced view of early national intellectual history that goes beyond the republican-liberal debate.

Writing from this perspective, Noll argues for American innovation in the integration of religion into these political and social ideas. But because he downplays the religious element in much English commonwealth thought of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he presents American thought as more distinctive than it necessarily was. Some of this may be inadvertent, the result of following other scholars who were long misled. Blair Worden has recently demonstrated that the religious elements in the writings of seventeenth-century English republicans such as Edmund Ludlow were deliberately excised in the first editions of their works by John Tolland and others. These became the standard editions for readers in the eighteenth century and for historians ever since, leading to a downplaying of the connection the seventeenth-century puritans saw between religion and republicanism. In

point of fact, as Worden argues, there exists in the republicanism of the 1640s and 1650s, "the most revolutionary [moment] of English history, a religious fundamentalism of overwhelming force, about which posterity has preferred not to know."[4] It may be true, as Noll states, that in the eighteenth century "almost all observers outside the United States assumed that republican thinking contradicted the principles of traditional religion," but among those that did not see the two as contradictory were English writers who were widely read in America (p. 54).[5] And while Noll is correct in saying that in the 1720s the Englishmen Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard advocated "human reason over human authority," those Real Whigs also wrote that "true religion . . . improves and enlarges the Faculties of Men, exalts their Spirits, and makes them brave for God and themselves, " and that it "inspires them with generous and beneficent Affections to one another, and with universal Love and Benevolence to the whole Creation"—a sentiment not that different from the "American" view of Benjamin Rush that Noll identifies (p. 61, 65).[6] Despite neglecting this dimension of its roots, Noll's discussion of how republican views and religion were synthesized in the era of the American Revolution is thorough and well argued. He skillfully analyzes the politics of revivalism, the mobilization of traditional anti-Catholicism in the wars against the French, and the varying meanings of the concept of virtue in how that synthesis was formulated.

The next major theme in *America's God* is the alliance that developed in America between evangelicalism and commonsense moral philosophy. Noll argues that the "turn by Protestants to the language of the eighteenth century's new moral philosophy represented as much a break from historic associations as did the turn to republicanism" (p. 93). This involved, as he expresses it, a rejection of the older "priority of revelation over reason, of grace over self-assertion, of conversion over good taste" that had been maintained by Cotton Mather and most of his religious forbears (p. 97). He offers a careful and persuasive account of how this revolution occurred, pointing out that "for Protestants who wanted to preserve traditional forms of Christianity without having to appeal to traditional religious authorities, commonsense reasoning of the sort provided by Francis Hutcheson was the answer" (p. 103). For those uncomfortable with the skepticism found in the writings of David Hume, the argument for a universal moral sense that could discern what was good and true proved immensely attractive. Furthermore, the fact that common sense was the possession of all made apprehension of the good available to all and not merely an elect few, making it more attractive in the new American republic. Chapter seven deals with "Colonial Religions in the Era of the Revolution" and surveys the impact of new ideas on Lutherans, the Dutch Reformed, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians,

and Congregationalists. Each of these faiths, in its own way, embraced republicanism. Liberal Congregationalists, Deists, Baptists, African Americans and other groups outside of the mainstream are dealt with in Chapter eight, though not with the same depth and insight accorded Methodists and Calvinists.

In this part of the book, too, the uniquely American nature of the developments Noll highlights can be called into question. Hicksite Quakers, Old School Presbyterians, Lutherans, and other American religious groups were more influenced by European writers and debates than Noll allows for. And developments that he presents as new were often dusted-off versions of older perceptions. For example, Ezra Stiles' claim that "the cooperation of 'Moses and Aaron … the magistracy and priesthood,' constituted the United States 'the happiest on earth'" (p. 137) echoes Samuel Ward's similar call for cooperation between magistracy and ministry in his 1618 English assize sermon preached to a bench that included John Winthrop.[7]

Part Three of *America's God* focuses on how the synthesis of evangelicalism, republicanism, and common sense that emerged by the 1830s shaped the value system that defined the America of that time as a peculiar type of Christian nation. An evangelical surge in the half-century after the American Revolution had transformed both American religion and public culture, with Methodists and Baptists leading the way. According to Noll, evangelicalism in this period was characterized by emphasis on the unmediated Word of God rather than institutions, and by the work of charismatic self-selected religious leaders as opposed to designated leaders. His analysis of evangelicalism is a sophisticated one. He analyzes divisions between formalists and antiformalists, polarities over race, differences generated by divisions between slave and free states, and those between men and women. In seeking to understand the expansion of the evangelical churches, Noll examines socio-economic explanations such as that offered by Paul Johnson, ideas suggested by the work of Jurgen Habermas, and the political-social interpretations of Gordon Wood and Nathan Hatch, while himself concluding that evangelicalism was "a type of religion ideally suited to revolutionary situations."[8]

Noll goes on to talk about the reasons for the spread of evangelical influence in the new nation, examining factors such as organizational innovations, the growing belief that religion provided the basis for the virtue that was essential to a successful republic, and a shift towards a religious ethic that accepted the marketplace. The result of these and other shifts was the Americanization of Christianity and the Christianization of American culture. Noll tells this story with care and attention to detail. He discusses the influence of seminary education on Protestant theology, particularly in the Reformed tradition. A helpful table charts the nine main Calvinist factions

from 1790 to 1860, identifying the representative figures in each and the predecessors from which each tradition drew inspiration. He explores each of the principal theological issues of the times, delineating the different theological answers to questions about how humans learned of God and salvation, the nature of God, the capabilities of mankind, and how men came to be saved. Noll is particularly skillful in examining the impact of new understandings of man's capacity for self-determination, new notions of human faculties, and the belief that next to the Scriptures human consciousness (common sense) offered the best guide to understanding the ways of God and the path to salvation. New insight is offered into major figures such as Lyman Beecher, N. W. Taylor, Charles Finney, and Horace Bushnell as well as less familiar writers such as Albert Barnes and Moses Stuart. According to Noll, "evangelical Protestants in the early republic succeeded, not only in winning individuals to Christianity, but in creating a Christian civilization, because they could demonstrate how their form of the faith might vivify, ennoble, and lend transcendent value to the most influential ideological engines of the nation: republican political assumptions themselves, democratic convictions about social organization, scientific reasoning pitched to common sense, and belief in the unique, providential destiny of the United States" (p. 437).

Relatively unexamined in this analysis of the nineteenth-century republic is the impact of the vast immigration of Roman Catholics to the United States. Aside from Orestes Brownson (who is mentioned in passing), American Catholicism at this time did not produce anyone who needs to be included in a treatment of theology, but the growing presence of Catholics did influence the thought of those for whom America's God was a Protestant God. Contact with this European-rooted faith was one challenge to the conceptual isolationism that Noll sees as characteristic of American religious thought. Another possible challenge, also unexamined in these pages, was the impact on American theologians of the contact with non-Christian traditions that resulted from the launching of international missionary outreach.

The last portion of Noll's study, "Crisis," is devoted to what he calls "a theological history of the Civil War" (p. 17). By the 1830s and 1840s sectional differences in how republicanism was understood—the South reverting to more classical formulations, while the North moved towards a more individualistic stance—threatened the Christian republican synthesis. As many traditional authorities had been undercut in the Revolutionary era and its aftermath, the Bible had come to assume greater authority in the lives of Americans. People no longer deferred as their ancestors had to bishops, presbyters and creeds, and the authority of the past itself was diminished. "What remained," Noll explains, "was the power of intuitive reason, the authority of written documents that the people approved for themselves, and

the Bible alone" (p. 371). And the Bible was interpreted in a spirit of commonsense literalism that sought and expected to find simple solutions to theological, moral, and social problems. But this approach was incapable of resolving the increasingly divisive issue of slavery. When accepted hermeneutics led to deeply divergent understanding of that institution, religion could not offer a resolution. Churches split as the nation split, with each side seeing God on its side.

The closing piece of *America's God* is a brilliant analysis of the theological insights contained in Lincoln's second inaugural address. It fell to this layman who affiliated with no particular church group to recognize that the moral high ground was not a monopoly of his side, to point out that both sides prayed to the same God and to extend charity to his foe. The contrast between the depth of his religious insight and the sterile approaches to the conflict expressed by prominent church leaders and theologians is a remarkable one.

Noll is correct in pointing out that Lincoln's second inaugural provides the most thoughtful Christian commentary on the conflict. And he is correct in pointing out the significance of the fact that this statement did come from a layman and not a theologian. But at the end of *America's God*, which focuses for over four hundred pages on theology and its impact on the nation, one is left wondering about what forms of lived religion created a culture in which a layman such as Lincoln could grasp the true nature of Christian belief better than any of the theologians we have been reading about.

Despite the quibbles I have expressed and others may offer about how truly unique the story is, *America's God* does succeed admirably in offering new insights into the history of theological development in America from 1730 to 1865. The effort to demonstrate that "the theologians translated the historic Christian message into the dominant cultural languages of politics and intellectual life so successfully that these languages were themselves converted and then enlisted for the decidedly religious purposes of evangelism, church formation, moral reform, and theological construction" is less successful (p. 443). Perhaps the focus is too much that of intellectual history. It would also be useful to see how the "migration of meanings attached to a particular set of words—words like freedom, virtue, benevolence, slavery, vice, selfishness" between public and religious spheres actually worked (p. 439). How did these developments affect the way religion was actually lived, the patterns of worship and the organization of local congregations? Was there a push, for example, for greater democracy at these levels? An analysis of social developments and political struggles between and within denominations, and within individual congregations, could offer additional insights into the story that Noll has chosen to tell. And if the migration of meanings did redefine public culture, many will wish for more proof, or at least for

more examples of public leaders using religious concepts in their discourse. There are many such statements to choose from, but interestingly the only meaningful such example in *America's God* is that of Lincoln, who is used to display the disjunction between the thought of the president and that of the theologians. The very richness of Noll's investigation of Lincoln's thought makes us wish for similar treatment of other leaders.

The story as told in this book concludes in 1865, but the history of the interaction between religious belief and American society continues to the present and will be important in the future. Mark Noll makes us think about that relationship in new ways that should make it hard for any future student of American civilization and any future author of an American history text to ignore the role of the preachers and theologians in the shaping of America and the way in which Americans have conceived of their land.

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1. *New York Times,* October 26, 2003.
2. Bruce Craig, "The Politics of 'Traditional' American History," *Perspectives: Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association* 41:8 (November 2003): 13–7.
3. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967); Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (1969). Noll ignores Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (1959), which develops some of the connections with seventeenth-century religious thinking.
4. Blair Worden, *Roundhead Reputations The English Civil Wars and the Passions of Posterity* (2001), 12.
5. For works that discuss the religious dimension of commonwealth ideology in early modern England see, for example, Andrew McRae, *God Speed the Plough* (2002); Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (2003); and Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550–1640* (2002).
6. John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, ""Arbitrary Government proved incompatible with true Religion, whether Natural or Revealed," *Cato's Letters*, February 17, 1721, in *The English Libertarian Heritage: from the Writings of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon*, ed. David L. Jacobson (1965), 162.
7. Samuel Ward, *Jethro's Justice of the Peace. A Sermon Preached at a General Assises held at Bury St Edmunds, for the Countie of Suffolk* (1618).
8. Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Societies and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837* (1978); Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Berger (1989); George Thomas, *Revivalism and Cultural Change: Christianity, Nation Building, and the Market in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (1989); Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992); Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989); and Noll, *America's God*, 503, n. 3, referring to his "Revolution and the Rise of Evangelical Social Influence in North Atlantic Societies," in *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700–1990*, ed. Noll, David Bebbington, and George Rawlyk (1994).