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Review

Mark A. Noll,

God and Race in American Politics: A Short History

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008)

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With the selection of Barack Obama as the Democratic nominee for President of the United States, a slew of conversation about race, both in academics and in the popular press, rekindled. Roughly speaking, there are two camps: those who believe that Obama's election heralds the end of racism in America and those who believe that matters are more complicated.

On the side arguing the end of racism are journalists such as Newsweek's Howard Fineman who, in the May 14th, 2008 edition of the magazine, wrote that, in announcing his run for office, Obama was making a statement: that his candidacy would be the exclamation point at the end of our four-century-long argument over the role of African-Americans in our society. Eight months later the January 9th, 2009, USA Today opined that the Voting Rights act should be overturned "now that a black man has won the presidency." The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, on January 20th, 2009, wrote that the Obama victory signified that "the political system that discriminated and the people who designed it are dead and gone."

The presence of a mixed race man in the most powerful political office in the land clearly had implications about race in America. If Mark A. Noll, in his book *God and Race in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton University Press, 2008), is correct, the election of a black man is as important to matters of race as it is to matters of politics and religion.

The main argument of this book is that in the United States religion and politics are inextricably intertwined and furthermore that race, as understood through the lens of religion, has affected politics for the entirety of this country's history. Using race to elucidate the complexity of religiopolitical development, Noll's main thesis is, in my mind, found on page 19:

Given electoral realities as represented by ... strong political bifurcations, it means that the ideologies that undergirded politics, particularly in functionally one-party regions of the country, and particularly in the Solid South, must be considered significant of the nation's political history as a whole. And if those ideologies were strongly shaped by ideas about race that were supported by religious convictions, then race and religion must be considered determinative influences on national politics.

The goal of this book is not to provide a deep and comprehensive history of the relationships between religion, politics, and attitudes and conceptions of race – the why of it - but to provide “a short history,” a place to begin the conversation. Thus, it provides snapshots of specific times in American history that illustrate the connections between politics, religious belief, and positions on race.

Chapter One, “The Bible, Slavery, and the ‘Irrepressible Conflict,’” opens with this statement: “Events from antebellum America have decisively shaped all subsequent American history in large part because of pervasive interconnections between religion, politics, slavery, and race” (13). The Christian religion provided the shared language of America since the arrival of white colonials in the fifteenth century. Noll places the use of religion to justify political decisions at the heart of the American political process – the use of religion to understand and rationalize political decisions had become commonplace by the time the abolitionists garnered public attention in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Using the Bible to understand proper human action in the worldly sphere is part and parcel of the Calvinist legacy in the United States. The question of slavery became not just a social issue and a test of the freedom to which this nation claims to aspire, but a religious concern.

The Bible documents the existence of slavery and makes no hard claims that God perceives the ownership of human beings a top priority. Thus the burden of proof fell to the abolitionists. Noll states, “The Civil War ... was fundamentally a religious battle of how to interpret the Bible and how to promote moral norms in public life” (14). The outcome of the Civil War affected widespread political change in the formation of new laws and public policies. Noll points out that the Civil War also caused schisms in most of the mainstream denominations over race. Ultimately however, the Civil War solved the issue of slavery, not the issue of race.

The second chapter of the book, “The Origins of African-American Religious Agency,” traces the rise of the black church, both as a religious force and as a political one. After the Civil

War segregation was maintained, ensuring the separation of white and black believers in almost every circumstance. Separation of worship provided opportunities for educated blacks to assert their knowledge and leadership in ways that reinterpreted the Bible to fit their circumstances. Deeply influenced by the evangelical religion that began cropping up in the beginning of the nineteenth century, black churches developed a form of Christianity “defined by immediate contact with the divine, Bible knowledge keyed to miraculous interventions and self-sacrificing heroes, (and) spirituals that rehearsed narratives of divine liberation” (55). Black churches became centers for personal transformation and social action that would carry the tide of black agency into the Civil Rights movement a hundred years later.

Chapter three, “Churches, ‘Redemption,’ and Jim Crow,” provides Noll’s overview of how modern republican government developed out of both American Christianity and the legacy of the Civil War. The federal government declared and waged the Civil War both in an attempt to end slavery and in hopes of reuniting a fractured nation. Following the Civil War the central government withdrew again – the South, in turmoil and confusion, threatened to disintegrate into riotous anarchy and the federal government allowed space for local communities to rebuild. However, southern municipalities immediately turned to segregation and Jim Crow to restore order and a semblance of peace. The federal government did little to enforce racial equality. Slavery ended; racism did not.

Another important theme that Noll elucidates in chapter three are the ways in which race drove party alliance, particularly in the South, following the Civil War. Southern Democrats were white and favored state control over local municipalities, abjuring federal oversight. White dominance of the Democrats meant, ipso facto, that blacks were mostly Republican, or would have been had they been allowed to vote. The black vote would not switch to the Democrats until Roosevelt and The New Deal. The most important effect of this political bifurcation, in Noll’s estimation, is that the South had a much larger population than it had registered voters. The result

of this disparity was that southern electoral votes were determined by an all white constituency consisting of only a percentage of the state's population. Racism perpetuated itself: whites elected white politicians who made sure that blacks stayed in their place and away from the polls.

Noll moves to the late 1950s and the rise of the Civil Rights movement in chapter four, "Religion and the Civil Rights Movement." The rising swell of religious fervor within the black churches, largely unregulated by white interference (or aided by sympathetic whites), drove the Civil Rights movement. Educated black elites developed sophisticated interpretations of the Bible drawing on the nonviolent resistance advocated by Gandhi and the increasing popularity of Social Gospel ideologies. Black lay members drew on the legacy of the personalistic theology coming through from the evangelical roots. Strong leadership combined with a lay conviction in the ability of God to work through individuals to affect change created a dynamic and unstoppable social movement culminating in the creation of the Equal Rights Amendment. The Civil Rights movement is one of the most remarkable times religion, particularly concerned with matters of race, affected widespread political change in American history. While new technologies such as mass media fed the movement, religion provided the necessary catalyst for real progress to be made to address the racism the Civil War had failed to solve.

Chapter Five, "The Civil Rights Movement as the Fulcrum of Recent Political History," serves as the conclusion of the book. One of the most important observations is that blacks went Democrat during the Great Depression and southern whites went Republican after the signing of the Civil Rights Act. White evangelicals could embrace the Civil Rights Act in order to claim that they were pro-integration and anti-racism. This made evangelicalism more palatable for the rest of the nation. This move also let evangelicals off the hook for not enacting proactive reforms and gave rise to the alliance between the Religious Right and the Republican Party. "[T]he great political complaint of modern evangelicals has been directed against what is perceived as a

federally sponsored intrusion of alien moral norms into situations where local mores and local leaders had once dominated” (157). By giving favorable lip service to equal rights, evangelicals could repeat the actions of white Christians after the Civil War – they could claim to be doing enough by merely accepting the idea of racial equality.

Furthermore, “evangelicals perceived the national mandates imposed by the federal government in the wake of civil rights initiatives as offensive intrusions attacking the family, gender, and sex” (157). Evangelicals believe that the government is intruding into how parents want to instruct their children about God: prayer in school, the evolution/creationism debate, display of religious symbols – to evangelicals “equality” came to mean “government manipulation” even when they supported it as in the ordination of women and racial egalitarianism.

Ultimately, the conclusion of Noll’s book is that the intersection of race, religion, and politics has driven American history more than any other combination of factors. So far however, “The American political system and the American practice of Christianity, which have provided so much good for so many people for so many years, have never been able to overcome race” (178).

Noll himself acknowledges that his book is but an introduction to a complex subject spanning four centuries. However, there are a couple of rather glaring oversights in his account. Noll makes no mention of American Indians. While Christianity involved itself heavily in the question of slavery, the religion was also involved in decisions regarding natives peoples. Comparing the ways in which Christianity was utilized to understand and control natives would make for an interesting comparison of Noll’s theory and perhaps strengthen his argument that religious understandings of race have been the driving force in American political history. Comparing mission schools with white masters intentionally proselytizing their slaves would

make for a fascinating study, particularly if an examination of local and federal laws concerning the rights of non whites were to be included.

The second misstep in the book occurs in Noll's contention that religion fell out of the public sphere following Reconstruction and stayed out until the rise of Civil Rights. While fundamentalism certainly withdrew in the 1920s, religion remained a driving social force. With regards to race, the Ku Klux Klan reformed in 1915 and gained its highest level of popularity and membership over the next ten years. The 1924 Democratic convention, affectionately called the Klanbake, ensured a Republican presidency in the next election cycle after the KKK descended en masse on the convention, resulting in near riots. Noll entirely overlooks the importance of these events. By neglecting the history of Native Americans, Noll places all of the emphasis on blacks. By contending that religion fell out of the public sphere for the first decades of the twentieth century, Noll inadvertently defines religion as a public phenomenon. When it withdraws into the private sphere, he assumes that it has no effect.

My final criticism of the book concerns the neglect of any reference to the rise of the Religious Right at the end of the 1970s. The formation of the Moral Majority was an intentional, and largely successful, attempt to take over the Republican Party, registering evangelical voters by the thousands, lobbying locally and in Washington for legislation, and backing candidates. The impact of these events are far reaching and continue to reverberate through American politics. While Noll mentions the Religious Right in passing, no details are filled in. For a book on religion, race, and politics this seems a bit of an oversight.

Criticism aside, however, Noll's book draws connections between race, religion, and politics that illuminate important aspects of America's legacy of racism. For example, while politicians are often questioned about their religiosity, Obama faced heightened scrutiny. Two years into his presidency there are still people who think he is a Muslim and to assume that this has nothing to do with the color of his skin is naive. During his bid for the Democratic

nomination he was forced to turn his back on the pastor he had followed for more than twenty years, the very pastor who performed his marriage ceremony, Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Obama's blackness called into question his religion, his very Americanism, and his ability to hold public office. Noll's book goes a long way toward explaining the strange American phenomenon of using religion to understand race in order to affect political change.