

sermons (and also a surprising number from Jonathan Edwards) to see them focusing directly on predestination and divine sovereignty (129). Those were background, foundational convictions, to be sure, but they most wanted individuals to see “the divine and supernatural light” (JE) or to experience “the new birth” (Whitefield).

Questions about creation, sin, death, and the fall are too complicated to address quickly, but after years ago reading B. B. Warfield on creation, evolution, divine sovereignty, the proper role of science, etc., my mind has been at ease with the notion that scientific investigations, when carried out with a focus on empirical results, can be a relatively safe pointer to how best to interpret at least some aspects of the Scriptures. The challenge, as Miller puts it quite well at several points in this book, concerns the weight that specific interpretations of early Genesis should be given. The idea that physical death before the fall and the goodness of the creation are incompatible strikes me as an unnecessary conclusion from *tota scriptura*, but I realize that a whole lot more is involved in such discussions than simple questions of one-off biblical interpretations.

I pray that this book will be helpful to Adventists as they deal with the important matters the book takes up. I’m glad Miller is bringing his gifts and insights to the service of his own Adventist fellowship, even as he continues to think about scholarship for the rest of us as well.

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Noll, Mark A. *In the Beginning Was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life, 1492–1783*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 339 pp. Hardcover, US\$29.95.

*The following is based on an oral response to a presentation that Dr. Mark A. Noll gave at Andrews University on his book In the Beginning was the Word. Nicholas Miller, who gave the response, studied for his PhD in American Religious History under Professor Noll’s oversight at the University of Notre Dame. Miller’s dissertation was on the religious influences on the American Constitution’s First Amendment, published as The Religious Roots of the First Amendment (Oxford, 2012).*

With his new book on the Bible in America, Professor Mark Noll has brought us another work of scholarship that affirms the importance of a knowledge of religion, Christianity, and the Bible to a fuller and more complete understanding of American history. *In the Beginning* gives an overview of the impact and role that the Bible had in American public life during its first three hundred years. It is not a review of the role of the Bible generally, but the Bible in relation to the public square and political life and identity.

The publication of this book coincides with Professor Noll’s last year of full-time teaching. The academy is now taking stock of his enormous contributions to the shape of both Christian history, and larger American intellectual history over the last four decades. *In the Beginning* provides a good opportunity to consider not only Noll’s mature thought on religion

and the Bible in America, but also how he has changed our understanding of American history by placing those elements nearer the center of the story than they had previously been in twentieth-century historiography.

*Religion Complexified.* In restoring a role for religion in American history, Professor Noll's works have never been simple or simplistic. He has not viewed religion, or Christianity, or even Protestantism as a monolithic force, either for good or for ill. His latest work reinforces the view that Christianity, or even Protestantism, is not just one thing. He reveals that the Bible did not just have one kind of influence or role in American history, but was on different sides of various arguments, and at times, on different sides of the same argument, whether it be revolution or slavery.

Whatever we believe about the divine nature and origins of the Bible, its use and impact in history is a very human endeavor. As Noll reminds us, it all too often can be co-opted for very human ends. This is an important lesson to keep in mind, especially in the middle of a presidential campaign, where we are bombarded with messages about how a "true Christian" would vote.

It is this diversity of the Christian and Protestant in history, however, that raises the question of interpretation of history. A major divide prior to Noll's work and that of his religious historian colleagues, such as George Marsden and Nathan Hatch, was the secular/religious divide. But now that religion is acknowledged to have played central roles in American history, we are faced with the question of what varying interpretations of American history might scholars produce who have somewhat different views of religion.

*Reformed vs. Arminian.* Professor Noll and I are on the same side of the secular/religious divide. We both agree that a view that integrates religious influences and ideas will make for a better history. But we are on different sides of another kind of divide that made our collaboration on my church-state dissertation a unique and, some would say, somewhat improbable task. Noll comes from the Reformed tradition, which views Jonathan Edwards and the New England Puritans as the exemplars of all that is true and good and pure in American religious history (to somewhat overstate the matter).

I come from a church in the Arminian, free-will tradition, that often views the Puritans as kind of embarrassing early cousins who gave religion a bad name by running an intolerant semi-theocracy in colonial America (again, to overstate things). Noll, in turn, views the Second Great Awakening, with its free-will, individualistic, subjectivist turn as the beginnings of the embarrassing descent into what has, in the eyes of some, become the self-made, therapeutic religion of modern America.

I first became aware of Professor Noll's views on this when, in my first year of history graduate work, I read Noll's *America's God*. It jolted me awake, being a superb and alarming challenge for an unsuspecting, self-satisfied Arminian. It argued the case that my religious heritage was actually part of the corruption of "real" American Christianity. (That is to put it too simplistically, of course, but not entirely inaccurately.) It was before Noll was at Notre Dame, and I had no idea I would one day study with him, but I knew that one day I would need to respond to that book.

*American Decline.* The sub-title of *America's God is From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, and it is not a story of progress and victory. Rather, it is story of descent and declension. The argument runs roughly that once America took the God of the Bible seriously, and all its intellectual currents ran through it, then these biblical currents became mixed with Enlightenment reason, Republican individualism, and Whiggish political ideas. While these elements, Noll accepts, made for a fine political ideology, these same political ideas leaked back into the reading of the Bible. Thus, many Americans made a God in the image of a republican, democratic leader, one who respected individual freedom, removed traditional religious authority, and allowed for the proliferation of American sects and denominations, with no hope for an agreed-upon religious basis.

This led, in Noll's telling, to an eventual crisis of moral authority in terms of the Civil War, which he details in a separate book, *Civil War as Theological Crisis*. Since American Protestantism could no longer adjudicate the public issues that really matter, like slavery, we enter a new phase where secular reason holds sway, and the Bible is sidelined into the private sphere.

*The Bible and Decline.* Noll's latest book takes up this story, this time telling it from the perspective of the role of the Bible in public life. I think Noll is proposing that this is the story of the Bible combining with other strands of thought to bring about great political and societal change, generally in a good way. But there is a price for this change, and part of the fallout is a change in the way people read Scripture, in a manner that is no longer as faithful to Scripture as previously. Here is a quote that I think makes this point: "As the eighteenth century wore on, more and more colonists elided their Christian convictions with political principles intensely distrustful of any top-down exercise of authority, including the authority of inherited religious establishments" (289). The word "elided" is particularly telling. While this verb can mean "combine," it much more often means "replace" or "strike out." Noll's use would suggest the latter meaning, as purer Christian convictions are leavened, changed, and even replaced with various political ideologies.

*Reform vs. Radical Bible Reading.* Now, in my reading of history, as a biblically conservative Arminian, I would say that these principles in opposition to top-down authority, and the authority of inherited religious establishments, were at their core an impulse of dissenting Protestantism, based on certain biblical teachings, especially the priesthood of believers. Luther and Calvin had flirted with these teachings early on, but moved away from them as they became part of the establishment. But they were championed by the radical reformers, came to England via the English Baptists, and then to America via multiple pathways, including Roger Williams, William Penn, John Milton, and John Locke.

So, in my telling, what is happening in America is that a Reformed reading of the Bible is becoming influenced by and, at times, giving way to a more radical reformation view of reading the Bible. So it is not the Bible being corrupted by secular, enlightenment thought, but the Bible being released from, dare I

say, the shackles of one set of hermeneutical principles, and being subjected to another that has at least an equal (possibly greater?) claim to biblical authenticity.

This difference of view is perhaps illustrated most clearly by our contrasting views of the New England clergyman and politician, Elisha Williams. He wrote a lengthy pamphlet protesting against the requirement that preachers be licensed by the state. It is a key colonial New England document that figures importantly in my earlier book, and I argue is an expression of Protestant dissenting thought, articulated in the language of Lockean political ideas. Locke himself, I argue earlier in the book, is himself influenced by dissenting Protestant political ideas.

Noll views the document somewhat differently. He writes that Williams' pamphlet reflected "first contemporary political convictions, then standard Protestant principles allied with those convictions, and (not inconsequentially, but still third), actual instruction from biblical narratives or precepts. As such," Noll continues, "The Bible remained more conspicuous than for contemporary considerations of economics, race, and slavery, but nonetheless a receding presence."

I would reverse those first two points, at least, and possibly put "contemporary political convictions" as the third. In my reading, Williams' pamphlet is radical not for injecting liberal political opinions into conservative New England, but for injecting dissenting Protestant views into a region historically committed, with the notable exception of Roger Williams, to magisterial views of the Bible and society.

*Paine's Common Sense.* Now do we have any evidence as to which reading or interpretation is fairer and closer to the evidence? Well, I believe that Noll, being a good historian, provides such evidence in his own work. He invokes Thomas Paine as a user of the Bible in arguing against monarchy. Now both Professor Noll and I know that Paine is not a sincere biblicist, as he goes on to write scathing attacks on the Bible. But in *Common Sense* he is trying to use orthodox Protestant reasoning to reach the Protestant community.

As Noll quotes him, Paine writes that "for monarchy in every instance is the popery of government." Monarchy is the popery of government. Think about this argument. Is it moving from political to religious, or is it the other way around? It's pretty clear that it is from religious to political. Paine is drawing on the widespread Protestant distaste for spiritual hierarchy of popes to argue against the civil hierarchy of kings. To be clear, this spiritual argument is not of Paine's devising, but is held widely by Protestants, but especially by those dissenting Protestants who emphasize the priesthood of all believers and the right of private judgment in matters of religious instruction.

Now, to those Protestant groups that have not held strongly to the priesthood of all believers and the right of private judgment, such as the Puritans and other Reformed believers, this might seem like a political innovation, that is blowing back and changing one's view of the Bible and theology. But that is to view the matter from a Reformed perspective. From a dissenting Protestant view, it seems much more like America's political

experience is causing many people to see more clearly the truths of dissenting Protestantism, and to shift to its reading of the Bible.

*American Shift.* Indeed, this is the story of American religion over the next half century, as the religious population shifts dramatically from Presbyterian and Congregational, the churches of the Puritans and Pilgrims and the First Great Awakening, to Methodist and Baptist, dissenting groups whose activities and views characterize the Second Great Awakening.

I want to refer to one more Noll quote that acknowledges that the American Revolution is really a contest over ways of reading the Bible: It is “not just that ‘religion’ factored large in the American Revolution, but that the War of Independence represented the struggle of Scripture incarnate as a weapon of the establishment contesting Scripture incarnate as a Whig weapon” (296).

I think this description of the struggle over Scripture is basically right, but I would paraphrase that with somewhat different terms. I would say it was “Scripture incarnate as magisterial Protestants understood it, including Anglicans and European Reformed thinkers, versus Scripture incarnate as understood by dissenting reformers, including Baptists, Methodists, and even many American Reformed believers.”

Now, having said this, I want to ask Professor Noll, if the heart of the American Revolution was differing views of the Bible, why was the Revolutionary War not the war of theological crisis, rather than the American Civil War? Noll argues that the church’s failure to solve the problem of slavery as a biblical matter led to the Civil War, and this failure caused the sidelining of the Bible in American public life. But if the Bible had the same “failure” at the American Revolutionary War, why did it not lead to a similar sidelining?

I’m not sure I know the answer to that question; perhaps Noll can give it. But I think it does provide some evidence that the Civil War is not the theological failure, or, at least, not the unique theological failure, that Noll has proposed. Seen through my dissenting Protestant lenses, it seems to me that the Civil War is actually a continued victory for the radical reformation and the moral-government-of-God reading of the Bible. Call it Civil War as theological climax, rather than crisis. Then, I think the post-Civil War biblical decline has to do primarily with an array of other forces, some ideological, including Darwinism and higher criticism coming out of Germany and England, as well as economic, financial, and social pressures.

*Why Does It Matter?* Let me touch briefly on why this discussion/debate matters beyond a historical interest in the dialogue and debate between Reformed and Arminian lines of thought. Being interested in law and politics, I cannot help but think about our current election, and the issues being contested there. I will blame neither the Reformed nor Arminian traditions for Donald Trump, except perhaps our failure to educate America more thoroughly historically, theologically, and philosophically. But I do think there were other candidates, including Ted Cruz, and our own Ben Carson, who tend to view the “true” religious heritage of America as being in the Christian American views of the New England Puritans.

If the Revolution, the Second Great Awakening, and the results of the Civil War are a “falling away” from our founder’s heritage, then notions of the separation of church and state and the religious pluralism, which was set out in principle in the Constitution and then guaranteed at the state level after the Civil War, cannot be viewed as positive historic models that should guide our future. Rather, some would argue, we should return to the “true” heritage of our Puritan pioneers, who combined church and state.

Now, Professor Noll has himself been critical of the “Christian America” thesis, and so I would in no way class him with Cruz or Carson. But his larger argument in this book, and *America’s God*, does give a much more sophisticated basis for a Puritan civil outlook as being our true heritage than I am comfortable with. I would view America’s true constitutional founding as being in the dissenting Protestant model, and it not being a falling away from biblical truth, but a stepping into an alternate stream of that truth.

*America’s Protestant Patron Saint.* Politics aside, the larger religious historical question may be to answer the question as to who is truly America’s Protestant patron saint. Is it Calvin, as mediated to America by the Puritans? Or is it Jacob Arminius, who becomes, in certain ways, the expression of early Luther and the Anabaptists, and is mediated to America by John Wesley and the free-will Baptists?

In honesty, the truth is probably some combination of the two, as my studies with Noll have taught me. Though I would give the edge to Arminius and Wesley, he would give the nod to Calvin, I’m sure (though our experience together has opened my eyes tremendously to Adventism’s Calvinist heritage). I hope I have played some small role in convincing him of the role that dissenting Protestant views have played. Ultimately, the two camps are needed to tell the full story, and especially to oppose the secular, liberal story being told on the left side of our political spectrum.

While we argue over whether the true American Revolution and founding was mostly Calvinist or Arminian in nature, there is a whole wing of our country that has decided that the American Revolution was actually the French Revolution. They are determined to remake our country in its image. We both know that is wrong, but that is an argument for another time.

I would like to thank Professor Noll for his important influence on the history profession, on American public life, and on my work in particular. I’m glad we had this chance to exchange views, as I’m afraid it may not continue in heaven. To paraphrase the Calvinist George Whitfield, when he asked if he would see his Arminian theological rival, John Wesley, in heaven: “Mark Noll will be so close to the Throne of Glory, and I will be so far away, I will hardly get a glimpse of him.”

And I would add that the line of admirers seeking to speak with him will be so long that by the time I get a chance, the Lord will have already straightened him out on these matters. But no doubt He will have found it necessary to straighten me out first!