
Mark Noll’s brief but incredibly insightful survey of *God and Race in American Politics* offers one of the most significant analyses of race and religion in American political history. He asserts that race and religion constitutes the nation’s deepest and most enduring moral problem and also its broadest and most enduring political influence. He describes the complicated interaction of race and religion as it has shaped the politics of the nation from the Antebellum period until the presidential election of 2004. He takes the reader on a journey of “superlative good and pervasive malevolence where neither simple trust in human nature; nor simple cynicism about American hypocrisy is adequate” (179). It is a story of paradox, the exercise of exploitation and domination over others, coexisting with the human longing for freedom. It is the commingling of “false consciousness with genuine idealism, economic dependence with economic exploitation, tribalism with universalism, and hatred with love” (ibid.).

Noll has rightfully pointed out that Christianity has had a very positive impact on the American political system, making it one of the most humane, enlightened, and good systems in the world. Yet for all its positive benefits, the practice of Christianity, which has provided and done so much good for so many people for so many years, has never been able to overcome race. On this matter, America has failed the test; somehow, in spite of all its other virtues, race remains its major stumbling block. This idea was summarized in the words of a former governor of Mississippi, and quoted by Noll, who said, “I must tell you that the problem of race, despite all the progress that we have made, remains the thorniest, trickiest and most difficult barrier that we confront to achieve a truly successful and united region” (174). The words of the governor can be applied not only to the Deep South, but to the entire nation.

Chapter 1 describes that from the earliest days and, in particular, during the Antebellum period, the political history of the United States was driven by debates about slavery, debates that became more intensely religious as the nation veered toward Civil War. Antebellum religious controversy about slavery overwhelmed and confused religious consideration of race. The Civil War destroyed the legitimacy of slavery, but left the question of race open, and it remains unanswered to the present. Philip Schaff was correct when he said, “the negro question lies far deeper than the slave question” (40).

Because the Civil War was fought by religious people, it was a religious war in which both sides trumpeted the righteousness of their cause. Before and during the war, advocates on both sides employed the Scriptures to defend their own convictions and excoriate the convictions of their opponents. The Bible was used to defend and condemn slavery, but neither side of the issue showed much interest in revealing what the Bible said about racism. It is no wonder that at the end of the war slavery may have died, but racism remained alive and would torment the nation until today.

In chapter 2, Noll shows how the African American religious tradition and institutions were established and how they became the major voice
against racism. Slavery was dead, but racism, a far more intransigent demon, was very much alive and was plaguing the Black community. Two writers of the time described it this way: Pauline Hopkins wrote: “We thought that with the abolishment of slavery the black man’s destiny would be accomplished. . . . [Yet today] a condition of affairs confronts us that [abolitionists] never foresaw: the systematic destruction of the Negro by every device which the fury of enlightened malevolence can invent. . . . This new birth of the black race is a mighty agony. God help us in our struggle for liberty and manhood” (58). Du Bois was even more uncompromising in his analysis of the Black man’s place in society: “The Negro race in America, stolen, ravished, and degraded, struggling up through difficulties and oppression, needs sympathy and receives criticism; needs help and is given hindrance, needs protection and is given mob violence, needs justice and is given charity, needs leadership and is given cowardice and apology, needs bread and is given a stone” (59). These sentiments reflected some of the despair that was felt in the Black community about the racism that was part of their daily lives.

In chapter 3, Noll discusses the resurgence of a virulent racism at the very moment the central government power was weakening due to its own inaction. Evangelical Christianity caved in to the “redemption” of the racist faith and may have facilitated this upsurge of racism against Blacks. This cooperation with racist America was true for both Protestants and Roman Catholics. Even as Christian America abandoned Blacks to the racist terrorism of the period and excluded Blacks from most of their congregations, it provided the impetus for the rise of a distinctly African American form of Christianity. It seems as if America’s politics and religion conspired to produce a counterrevolution that stripped the recently freed slaves of their newly won rights. The racist bigots of the South coopted one of the most iconic concepts, (redemption) of the Bible to describe their restoration to power. To Blacks, however, redemption now meant a kind of restoration to “hell.” The restoration of many of the former confederacy leaders in the South resulted in the reinstitution of a new and more pernicious kind of slavery for Blacks.

In chapter 4, Noll analyzes the Civil Rights movement and religion, showing that religion propels the movement while also acting as a resistant force against the movement, but not nearly as resistant as in former times. It was the impetus provided by Black Christianity and the dynamic spark of the African American faith that facilitated the success of the Civil Rights movement. The sense of conviction that “God was on their side” was foundational in driving the advocates of civil rights and sustaining them until at last some of their goals were met” (167). Many of the civil-rights leaders were deeply religious figures in their community. The songs of the movement were religious, and the major institution that supported and nurtured the movement was the Black church. Although the aims and the goals were clearly political, the movement itself could be described as a somewhat religious movement being propelled by religious people.

Noll’s book is a must-read for all those interested in the study of race, politics, and religion in America. He has exposed America’s original sin, which
is not slavery but racism. The volatile interaction of race and religion has shown America at its best and its worst. Race remains an enduring presence in American society. Racism ironically has both been defended and condemned by religion and politics. Noll's analysis reveals that the more religious Americans are, the more they tend to vote conservatively, supporting less government intrusion into local affairs, which has had the effect of reinforcing racism in many parts of the country. Conservative governments are less willing to use the power of the government to ameliorate the historic and continuing wrongs committed against Blacks. In this sense, religion becomes an ally of racism. It appears that racial solidarity invariably trumps loyalty to truth and justice.

Knoll's analysis of these most complicated issues in American history reveals a narrative of often contradicting religious and moral complexities. He wrestles with his subject, not shying away from this difficult assignment, with moral dexterity, skilful analysis, and solid historic research. Knoll has provided much food for thought.

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Ranko Stefanovic now teaches New Testament at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University. This second edition of his commentary on Revelation is not greatly different from the first edition, but it does make some subtle improvements in a few areas, apparently in part at least to feedback received from readers of the first edition. Aside from the correction of a few editorial errors or misstatements, the major content changes involve a number of additions and a few revisions in selected areas of the commentary.

The first major revision is with the methodological approach to the text. One finds that Stefanovic has added some clarity to the approach that he follows in the commentary. Although he still notes that all of the various approaches “have some elements of truth” (12), a debatable premise, he ends up concluding, “Despite the fact that historicism has generally been denied and marginalized by modern scholarship, this commentary shows it to be the most appropriate approach to the book of Revelation” (14; cf. 16). He seemed unwilling to make such a statement in the first edition, adopting rather an eclectic methodology that lets “the text govern the interpretation,” whether it be historicist, preterist, futurist, or idealist (12, 1st ed.). This change will please many Adventists who follow the historicist interpretation of Revelation, but it will not endear him to those who prefer an eclectic—or other—approach. To Stefanovic’s credit, he has followed a historicist approach fairly consistently throughout the commentary.

The clearer and more consistent historicist approach plays out in notable fashion in his exposition of the letters to the seven churches, where he notes that “it would be quite appropriate to read the seven messages of Revelation 2–3 in the final stage of interpretation as Christ’s evaluation of the Christian