God and Race in American Politics, by Mark A. Noll

Mark Noll, who was the speaker at the Reformed Institute's first convocation in 2004, argues in his newest book that race has always been central to American politics, in many periods absolutely the most influential, and that religion has crucially shaped public attitudes on race. The second of these claims is certainly valid, but the first, at least as so broadly stated, is more questionable.

—To make his case Noll, drawing on his prodigious knowledge of the recent torrent of scholarship and journalistic accounts on religion in American politics, provides compact but well documented and closely reasoned examinations of interactions between race, religion, and politics during major periods in American history.

In a chapter covering the time from 1830 to the Civil War, Noll describes the gradual breakdown of constitutional and legislative compromises that had been designed to prevent regional differences over slavery from dividing the Union. By 1845 the Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian denominations, together including well over half the national population, had split into northern and southern churches differing over slavery. Both sides invoked the Bible to justify their moral convictions on the issue. Southern religious leaders pointed out that many passages of the Bible, including the New Testament, accept slavery as an assumed social given or even call on slaves to be obedient to their masters. Most northern Protestant churches, after considerable internal controversy, came with growing unanimity to condemn slavery as utterly incompatible with their understandings of the ethical imperatives of Christianity. Fired by religious passion, "the Civil War became a war to end slavery rather than just to preserve the Union."

For most white Americans, including the churches, however, the struggle was always a fight to destroy the institution of slavery rather than to overcome racism—even though, as Noll points out, "the Bible is much clearer in its teachings against racism than it is about its permission of slavery." Noll sympathetically cites two academic critics of modern capitalism who argue that "if race could have been taken out of the picture, some aspects of slavery may have offered a corrective to some aspects of America's economic acquisitiveness and social individualism"—an extreme conclusion with which few mainstream readers are likely to agree.

After the Civil War ended and the slave system was constitutionally abolished, most whites, in the North as well as the South, assumed that racial separation would continue, in the churches as well as other social institutions. Building on this assumption, southern whites soon erected official structures of racial discrimination that in effect made African-Americans in the South a legally repressed class. In the North discrimination was generally more informal but social segregation was almost universal.

Faced with exclusion from most established institutions, blacks all over the country, building on foundations like the earlier founded African Methodist Episcopal Church, began developing their own churches and educational activities. Black churches became major sources of political, social, and intellectual leadership. "The energy displayed by blacks in the decades after the Civil War," Noll writes, "began a process that, decades later, would bring a religious-inspired transformation of American public life."

Official segregation and racial discrimination in the South were largely carried out through

southern branches of the Democratic party that regained political dominance partly through terror and force after Reconstruction ended in the 1870's. Most southern whites banded together in racially segregated state Democratic parties as a means for excluding blacks from politics and government. As Noll points out, this had the effect of giving white southerners a power of veto on issues involving race within the national Democratic party which depended on southern support to remain competitive in presidential elections and Congress. Fear that a strong federal government might act against official racial segregation in the South re-enforced traditional southern resistance against centralized national government.

Another political effect of the one-party Democratic South, of which Noll makes less note, was that economically and morally conservative southerners were prevented from joining northern Republican conservatives in national elections, thereby diluting conservative strength on issues outside race.

White Protestant churches, including many which had been intensely active for abolition of slavery, generally made little objection to either official segregation in the South or informal segregation in the North. Ardent abolitionists like Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe approved or acquiesced in post-war racial segregation. Frances Willard led the Women's Christian Temperance Union to accept official segregation in the South as a means for promoting national reconciliation. The Catholic church, while struggling against religious bigotry, was generally passive on race issues.

Noll claims that "race in conjunction with religion was of first importance" in setting the course of national politics from the end of Reconstruction to the 1960's. It is true that the role of race in preserving the one-party Democratic South had an important effect on national politics. Race naturally remained a central issue for African- Americans who were able to vote. But for most whites outside the South during this period, which included both World Wars, the Great Depression, and the beginning of the Cold War, race was simply a non-issue. As Ronald Reagan once said, "We didn't even know we had a race problem."

The civil rights movement of the 1960's, launched by the African-American churches, for the first time since Reconstruction raised race to a position of prime importance in national politics. Most mainline Protestant denominations, the Catholic church, and the Jewish community, following the lead of the black churches, vigorously supported the drive to end legally sanctioned racial discrimination. As Lyndon Johnson said, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 could not have been passed without the help of the churches. White evangelical churches, after initial resistance by some of their southern leaders, generally followed the example of Billy Graham in accepting the need for change.

The civil rights movement had important ramifications for national politics beyond race. When Barry Goldwater, the Republican candidate for president in 1964, voted against the Civil Rights Act the substantial minority of African-Americans who had continued to vote Republican as late as 1960 switched overwhelmingly to the Democratic side, where most black voters have remained ever since. Even more important, passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, by guaranteeing blacks the right to vote, struck the death knell for the one-party Democratic South. Once blacks could no longer be barred from participating in southern Democratic state primaries, white southerners who were conservative on economic and moral issues had no reason not to join fellow conservatives in the national Republican party. Over a period of about twenty years, the South was transformed from an overwhelmingly

Democratic domain to a predominantly Republican region, with expanded national impact through rapid economic and population growth.

In a final narrative chapter, Noll argues that the civil rights movement has been "the fulcrum of recent political history." Changes in voting behavior among white evangelicals and white Catholics from the Democratic to the Republican side since 1960 helped move national politics at least temporarily in a more conservative direction. In both cases, he claims, "civil rights—broadly construed—was the reason."

Reaction against some of the measures undertaken by the federal government to promote racial equality, particularly affirmative action, no doubt played some part in the conservative political shift among white evangelicals and white Catholics. But other major issues contributing to this shift include: abortion, a long series of Supreme Court decisions aimed at reducing the role of religion in the public square, militant opposition to international Communism during the Cold War, concern over crime and the breakdown of family life, support for the war against terrorisn since 2001, and general opposition to the growth of "big government," among others. It is hard to see how all or even many of these issues can be traced to "civil rights," no matter how broadly construed.

It may well be true—probably is true—that, as Noll eloquently argues in a brief "theological conclusion," racism is among the deepest and most ineradicable sins in American public and private life. But progress against this sin, to which he movingly rallies us, is not helped by exaggerating the practical effects of race as an actual issue in American politics.

God and Race in American Politics, by Mark A. Noll, Princeton University Press, 209 pp., $22.95

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