Church History (2023), **92**, 388–391
doi:10.1017/S000964072300135X

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Three Bible Nation Arguments and the Black Social Gospel

Gary Dorrien

Union Theological Seminary

This book completes the magnificent two-volume work that Mark Noll began with *In the Beginning Was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life, 1492–1783* (2016), or to say the same thing differently, it completes the trilogy of his summing-up books that he began with *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (2002). Like its two predecessors, *America's Book* contains capsule summaries of arguments that Noll has proffered in several of his many previous books, especially on US American evangelicalism and the Civil War. Moreover, it ranges comprehensively over the vast expanse of US American religious history in meaning-of-it-all fashion, with Noll's customary acumen. No scholar tires of the accolade "magisterial," which Noll earned for *America's God* and *In the Beginning Was the Word.* This book completes a magisterial trilogy by lucidly, astutely, learnedly, and generously covering its waterfront, and by disciplining the entire exposition with a twofold argument that yields a third argument.

His first argument is that the "Second Great Awakening" construct produces a mushed-together "evangelicalism" that obscures the different kinds of Protestantism that built the Bible Civilization of Colonial America and the USA. The sheer arbitrary difficulty of establishing the beginning and ending of the "Second Great Awakening" has long been an argument for retiring this construct, or at least for playing it down. Noll's focus on the role of the Bible in the development of antebellum US American Protestantism sharpens the case for retirement. He stresses that the Christianizing process was steady and strong through the second half of the eighteenth century; it is not like there was any great falloff between 1755, when the First Great Awakening supposedly ended, and 1790, when the Second one supposedly began.

Three kinds of Protestants fired the Christianizing process: (1) Methodists, (2) Baptists and other localists, and (3) Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and some Episcopalians. All fully qualified as "evangelical," appealing to the singular or ultimate authority of the Bible. Noll recounts that Methodists played the lead role, preaching that the Bible calls for a New Birth in Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit. They were decidedly apolitical, which distinguished them from the other main white Protestant groups. Baptists and other localists, anxious about their own liberty, enlisted the Bible and the religious freedoms of the emergent American Republic to secure their own liberty. Presbyterians and Congregationalists, anxious that America's experiment in self-governing liberty needed to produce virtuous citizens to survive, pioneered the civic republican sensibility of custodial Protestantism. Noll justly contends that all

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of American Society of Church History. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 18.117.102.61, on 10 Nov 2024 at 09:20:45, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000964072300135X

three groups played key roles in spreading Protestant religion through every region of the USA and every economic class. The Methodists were not more evangelical for spurning politics; meanwhile, the custodial Protestants were the chief founders of the social gospel movement, which called churches to support social justice causes, Christianizing the structures of society. The social gospel, however, was very divisive. Wherever it arose, it disrupted previous assumptions about how biblical teaching should be interpreted, and carried forward in new ways the consuming debate of the antebellum period over scriptural teaching concerning slavery.

Noll's second argument is that antebellum debates about slavery and race surpassed in importance all other issues pertaining to the history of America's Book. How could America be, or become, a Bible Civilization if it countenanced the chattel enslavement of human beings of African descent? The attempt to build a Bible Civilization foundered on this question, as the Bible stupendously failed to be what white Protestants claimed it was, a unifying and comprehensive guide to all truth. The Bible was an important source of division, rival claims, and conflict. Noll recounts that every presidential election from 1828 to 1860 featured evangelical Protestants campaigning for their side with the King James Bible in hand. Virginia Baptist pastor Thornton Stringfellow and New York freelance writer Josiah Priest produced landmarks of proslavery ideology marshalling scriptural evidence that God approved of slavery. Southern Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell supplied the classic case that slavery was fully Christian as long as slavers allowed their enslaved persons to be baptized, to worship, and to marry.

Noll surveys Northern and Southern Protestant variations on Thornwell, moves on to timorously anti-slavery emancipationists, and describes varieties of abolitionist argument. He does not claim too much for his subject, accepting the recent historiographical trend that pictures slavery as "an economic-cultural juggernaut driving every national development of any significance whatsoever" (431). It is enough to say, he aptly observes, that the Bible played a large role in America's national story, shaping how the nation conceived itself. Moreover, the arguments over slavery that raged during the rise of America's Bible Civilization importantly influenced what happened to the Bible after the war—Noll's third argument, playing out number two.

He tracks the careers of racist arguments that crossed into the postbellum context, especially the refashioned versions that ramped up the language of race hatred, which invented new forms of it. The Thirteenth Amendment overthrew the slave system undergirding an entire way of life; the backlash against Reconstruction set off a seventy-five-year torrent of racist lynching best called white terrorism, and the Bible was enlisted to prove that dark-colored people belonged to a different species than light-colored people. This was a fertile field, as Noll recounts. A fading trope about Noah and his sons made a dramatic comeback in the white South, where it was taught in seminaries and preached as the gospel truth.

Some readers will have a stronger stomach than others for this material. I confess to scanning ahead for the sections on biblical criticism, liberal theology, and I hoped, the Black social gospel, counting how many pages remained before I got there. Noll makes his case that the public authority of the Bible dramatically declined in US American life after the Civil War. The King James Bible remained a wellspring of public rhetorical expression and retained its authority within church life as the "Word of God." It swiftly lost ground, however, to religious pluralism in US American public life, and its status as the Word of God was sharply contested within and outside churches in the later

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 18.117.102.61, on 10 Nov 2024 at 09:20:45, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000964072300135X

nineteenth century with the ascent of evolutionary science, biblical criticism, the modern research university, liberal theology, and the fundamentalist-modernist controversy.

When Noll takes up US American liberal theology, on page 530, he has to pull back to 1820 and Unitarian icon William Ellery Channing, one year after Channing relented to wearing the Unitarian name as a badge of honor. Orthodox Calvinists were going to call him a Unitarian anyway, so he stopped fending off the name. Noll rightly observes that Channing still believed in a normative Bible and in the credibility of the Scriptural miracle stories; he was only half-accepting of German biblical criticism, preferring the scholarship of English Anglican rationalist Samuel Clarke. Channing said he opposed slavery for the same reason that he opposed Calvinism—both grossly violated the sacred dignity of human life attested by the Scriptures and the divine light in every human soul. Noll notes that Channing was not an abolitionist like William Lloyd Garrison and his followers, who said they would dump the Bible if the Bible defended slavery. Channing held fast to his conscience and the Scriptures, contending that his ethical principles were rooted in the Bible and manifest in human nature. He walked the tightrope between proslavery Bible believers and postbiblical abolitionists. But Noll says that Channing and other Northern emancipationists like him changed the logic of the moral argument. The original version was that there is no tension or fissure between Scripture and the universal moral sense, so every reasonable person knows the moral law. The Channing reformers were more chastened than that. They said that God educates the human race through the gradual unfolding of moral principles.

Progressive reformers like Yale theologian Samuel Harris and New Haven Congregational pastor Newman Smyth described the abolition of slavery as an epochal demonstration that God progressively guides human beings to a higher morality. Noll weaves this thread through the biblical criticism of Charles Briggs, the social gospel of Washington Gladden, and the Christian socialism of Walter Rauschenbusch. Briggs's very modest use of historical criticism got him expelled from the Presbyterian Church. Gladden moved to the political Left in his later career only because the predatory hostility of the capitalist class toward working people drove him there, not because he wanted to go. Noll aptly observes that Rauschenbusch held fast to the gospel figure of Jesus and his emphasis on the Kingdom of God. I appreciate that Noll does not recycle the stereotypical convention that Rauschenbusch minimized the biblical doctrines of sin and evil. Rauschenbusch piled up six successive chapters on sin in his *Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917), culminating with a grim chapter on the kingdom of evil. If liberal theology was one of the sundering forces that diminished the role of the Bible in American life, as Noll justly argues, it is not because there was no such thing as a biblically centered liberal theology.

America's Book drives to a concluding chapter titled “Still Under a Bushel” that gathers Black Church counter-examples to the book's central story of biblical conflict, tragedy, failure, loss, decline, and replacement. It offers jeweled summaries of how Frederick Douglass, anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells, African Methodist Episcopal (AME) bishop Daniel Alexander Payne, Episcopal cleric Alexander Crummell, AME missionary T. G. Steward, AME Zion pastor J. W. Hood, AME bishop Henry McNeal Turner, Baptist cleric George Washington Williams, and Presbyterian pastor Francis J. Grimké fought off the hostility and oppression of the dominant society by holding fast to the scriptural Word, often in the distinct narrative and typological styles of the Black Church. This is a perfect ending to a massive book of prodigious learning, except that it strings together individuals scattered across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with no sense of the emphasis on building protest organizations within

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 18.117.102.61, on 10 Nov 2024 at 09:20:45, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000964072300135X

and outside the churches that defined the Black social gospel. Wells and Grimké were prominent in the school of Black freedom fighters who said that churches had to build protest organizations and enlist in the political struggle for justice. So were AME Zion bishop Alexander Walters, who led the Afro-American Council (founded in 1898); AME clerics Reverdy Ransom and Richard R. Wright Jr., who both made bishop and regarded themselves as the Du Bois figures in the AME Church; National Baptist Convention leaders Nannie Burroughs and Adam Clayton Powell Sr.; and many others.

The Black Church was born liberationist, hearing a message of freedom that was not what the likes of Benjamin Morgan Parker intended. All Black churches share in the legacy of this founding, but only a minority have ever preached about struggling for justice in the social and political spheres. Black social gospel leaders pressed the difference from the beginning of their new-abolitionist founding in the 1880s, with all the defining idioms of the social gospel, under the conditions of racist tyranny. They distinctly recast the inherently divisive social gospel contention that struggling for social justice is part of the gospel. Every Black social gospel founder except Walters had to fight off opposition from their own denomination, a story that was still playing out in 1961, when Martin Luther King Jr. was driven out of the National Baptist Convention USA. *America's Book* ends during the period that Black social gospel founders fended off a mania of racist lynching, built a fledgling protest culture and organizations, and endured the fabled "nadir" of the early twentieth century, endangering themselves in ways that no white social gospel leader faced. The Black social gospel of that era paved the way to King and the Civil Rights movement, and needs to be identified as such.

Gary Dorrien teaches at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University. His many books include, most recently, *American Democratic Socialism: History, Politics, Religion, and Theory* (Yale University Press, 2021).

Cite this article: Dorrien, Gary. "Three Bible Nation Arguments and the Black Social Gospel." *Church History* 92, no. 2 (June 2023): 388–391. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000964072300135X.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 18.117.102.61, on 10 Nov 2024 at 09:20:45, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S000964072300135X