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BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Which "America"? What "Civilization"?

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For most of the years I was working on the book that has been so graciously but also insightfully critiqued by these four interlocutors, my working title was *Bible Nation: From Tom Paine and Francis Asbury to Francis Grimké and Woodrow Wilson*. My plot, as I conceived it, ran from Paine, who inadvertently precipitated an all-but unanimous defense of the Scriptures from a wide swath of otherwise contentious Protestants, and Asbury, who did so much to promote "the Bible alone" in the population at large, to Wilson, who championed the Bible in almost exclusively civil religious terms, and Grimké, who—though a Presbyterian—sustained the earlier African American alteration of apolitical Methodist piety to include what Dennis Dickerson has aptly called "an egalitarian/evangelical thrust."

While keeping that plot, but thanks to a suggestion from Cynthia Read at Oxford University Press, to whom the book is co-dedicated, I exchanged my original title for one that spells out explicitly what listing the four historical figures only intimated. Or at least the sub-title is clear, because it underscores my intention to write a book explaining both the general shape of nineteenth-century American history and the substantial contribution of the Bible to that history.

In particular, I have tried to show how in the first half century of the United States multiple developments led to the creation of a post-Christendom democratic republic in which it was widely believed that voluntary promotion of the Bible could supply the virtue without which republics fail. Reaction to Tom Paine's *Age of Reason* precipitated extraordinary unity concerning the Bible's divine character among Protestants, who at the time provided the nation's only comprehensive value system apart from commitment to republicanism itself. The Methodists under Francis Asbury came out of nowhere to reshape the national religious landscape with their Bible-grounded message. Jurists, though eager to develop *American* legal procedures, were not yet questioning the British placement of the Bible at the center of the common law. The publication of bibles along with Bible-themed books and periodicals not only dwarfed all other publishing efforts but also created models for what became the nation's print culture. The Bible featured prominently in the daily schedules and the textbooks of the nascent common school movement. Many African Americans and some Native Americans found in Scripture both personal liberation and resources against use of the Bible to marginalize, demean, and enslave them. By the mid-1820s, American civilization was a Bible civilization.

The second part of the book explains why that civilization could not be sustained, the last part how real but ever-more fragmented legacies of the Bible civilization were still alive when Protestant and academic elites in 1911 celebrated the 300th anniversary of the King James Version.

Leigh Schmidt, sensitive to the ambiguous hyperbole of my title (as opposed to the clarity of the subtitle), wishes that I had done more with advocates of freethinking religion and women's rights activism who contested the claim that the Bible was "America's Book." Leigh himself, as a leader in an expert array of historians stretching from Henry Steele Commager through Kerry Walters, Isaac Kramnic, and R. Laurance Moore to, most recently, Christopher Grasso and Eric Schlereth, has shown how important for American history were those who denounced trust in a supposedly divine Bible and how, in truth, many contenders did exist for the title "America's Book," sporadically before 1876 and in greater numbers thereafter. Yet for the purposes of my narrative, the history of which Leigh is a master adds only a little for understanding the political-intellectual-religious nation that really did come into existence early in the nineteenth century and continued with a wide variety of lingering effects after it began to decline. As more germane to my purpose, I have foregrounded Bible believers who from the start opposed efforts to create a Bible civilization, Bible believers who shared that purpose but could not agree on what guidance from the Bible entailed, and the marginalized populations that also turned to the Bible but whose voices were rarely heard in debates over national purpose until after the Second World War.

It is probably disingenuous to say that criticisms merit unusually serious attention when the review making those criticisms begins with phrases such as "a monumental work of scholarship . . . judicious, circumspect, and fair-minded." Yet realizing that Amanda Porterfield's velvet glove of appreciation hides an iron fist of shrewd questions is also to realize that her questions prompt the best kind of discussion. I would like to push back on some of them, but at least two point out what I agree are genuine problems.

First the push backs. She says that "pervasive anxiety" marked responses to Paine's *Age of Reason*, which is certainly correct when looking at the Episcopalian Uzal Ogden's giant refutation that focused mostly on Paine's threat to social order. By contrast, "anxious" is hardly an appropriate word for the New Hampshire Sandemanian Daniel Humphreys, the Virginia Baptist Andrew Broaddus, or Joseph Priestly, a Unitarian recently come to America; these authors and many others took pains to explain that they agreed with different aspects of Paine's attack on traditional hierarchies even as they roundly denounced what he wrote about the Bible.

Amanda suggests that the longer history of Methodism's "convergence with industrialization and continental expansion" deserved fuller discussion. She is right, but I justify spending so much time on the era of Francis Asbury because of how remarkably his stance—apolitical but deeply involved in the lives of ordinary people—contrasted with both Democratic sectarian Protestants and Federalist-then-Whig custodial Protestants—as well with the left- and right-wing Christian zealots of our own day.

She makes parallel observations about American women and Native Americans, that in the former case they suffered because loyalty to the Bible cemented a "relationship between authority and patriarchal order" and in the latter case because the Bible was used to justify "abuse and forced indoctrination at the hands of protestant missionaries." These observations are certainly correct—in the main. But with admittedly just a glance at Native Americans such as William Apess and George Copway, and with somewhat greater attention to women such as Harriet Livermore, the Grimké sisters, and Frances Willard, I think I have shown that when patriarchal biblicists opened the Scriptures to lecture their inferiors, those inferiors proved time and again that they could read the Bible for themselves.

On Emily Dickinson, I am predisposed to defer to Amanda's deeper knowledge. Yet even the poem she quotes might lead to the conclusion, not only that with Dickinson

we have "the authority of the Bible as great literature in relation [in tension with] its authority as a mainstay of patriarchal social order," but to an awareness that for Dickinson the tension came from within the complex and contested authority of the Bible in relationship to itself.

As for not rushing into print in 2008, I regret to tell Amanda that it would not have made any difference.

Of her two critiques that seem most telling, the first suggests that basing a work almost entirely on published sources presents "a *mirror* of American thought but not a *complete* or *undistorted* one." Yes, entirely correct. In the same way that "America's God" was never only the deity described by Americans who went into print, so "America's Book" was never only the opinions, conventions, applications, and interpretations of the Bible found on the printed page. A study of the sort she desires, which included those who did not as well as those who did publish, would almost certainly require changes, perhaps serious changes, in the narrative I have provided.

The second critique draws attention to how Quakers, or individuals such as Anne Hutchinson, "interpreted Scripture in light of the authority of conscience rather than the reverse." Along the same lines, she describes "Black Christianity" as a religion where "the supernatural aspect of biblical authority becomes profoundly experiential and metaphorical, perhaps not all that far from inner light or artistic expression."

These observations about ways of approaching Scripture that differed significantly from those in the dominant culture provide a bridge to critiques from Dennis Dickerson and Gary Dorrien that also strike me as on target. Dennis chides my account of Black engagement with the Bible for neglecting *African* contributions to what became African American Christianity. He also summarizes a great quantity of outstanding scholarship by concluding that "the Bible for subaltern populations . . . functioned differently for the politically powerless and the disenfranchised." For his part, and after offering a clearer précis of the book than I could ever manage, Gary Dorrien provides a necessary qualification for any attempt to describe a single, uniform, and undivided African American Christian history. ("The Black church was born liberationist . . . . 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.") But then he adds that my effort to write about the Bible among African Americans faltered for not showing that "the Black social gospel of that era [the nineteenth century] paved the way to King and the Civil Rights movement, and needs to be identified as such."

The general question I take from Porterfield, Dickerson, and Dorrien asks, in effect, why I define the "America" and think of "civilization" as I do. Because my attention centered on the volume sacred to white Protestant traditions, I also foregrounded the ways within the politically dominant culture in which the Bible was promoted, debated, applied, and abused. Their critique suggests that other approaches by other Americans who were just as convinced of the book's divine character could have led not to a different "Book" but to a different "America." Begin with the Quaker heeding of Inner Light alongside Quaker loyalty to Scripture that allowed Benjamin Lay, John Woolman, and Anthony Benezet to mount the first detailed biblical arguments against slavery. Then, go on to the internalization of Scripture in Black communities that favored narrative, communicated first through oral means, and exploited biblical exemplars to the hilt. I have learned most about such voices from Dennis himself, Allen Callahan, Vincent Wimbush, and most recently Christopher Tomlin, but there are many others. Considering again only published works, this great cloud of witnesses begins with Britain Hammon, Jupiter Hammon, Equiano, John Morrant, and David

George; it goes on to Richard Allen, Maria Stewart, Harriet Jacobs, Jarena Lee, and Harriet Tubman; it extends through Alexander Crummel, Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne, Charles Octavius Boothe, and Francis Grimké; and then, as Gary Dorrien indicates, far beyond the Grimké's era.

Here is the point: In *American* history, there existed from the start traditions of biblical appropriation very close in their respect for the Bible as normative divine revelation to the traditions I emphasize. Yet even with shared convictions about the Bible, these other efforts constituted not only an alternative to the dominant approaches, but also an alternative to what "America's Bible Civilization" actually was. That critique would not require an entirely new book, but one offering a more complex understanding of *the American history* I tried to tell.

And then to the question implicit in Leigh Schmidt's conclusion that my book is in the end "nostalgic for the moral and spiritual coherence that a Protestant Bible civilization posited but never realized." This question is certainly in order for a book written by a relatively traditional Protestant who holds a relatively traditional view of the Bible's divine character.

No, I am not nostalgic for a time when the fantasy of "the Bible alone," the conventions of "common sense" reasoning, and the democratic propensity to heed the loudest voices in the public square made it difficult for biblical *arguments* from the likes of Freeborn Garretson, Daniel Coker, and Tyler Lewis to convince the public. (I wish I had phrased what I am not nostalgic about as clearly as Amanda when she referenced "the escalating problem of proof-texting": "There is a certain symmetry here: the overcoming of one form of political division [relying on the Bible to overthrow Christendom] to shape America's distinctive form of biblical civilization was followed by another form of political division [relying on the Bible to contest others who relied on the Bible] that pulled it apart.")

I am not nostalgic for a social order in which my or anyone else's religion can coerce my or anyone else's children to read from any one sacred book—or, more broadly considered, be constrained to accept any one ideological depiction of reality.

But, yes, I am nostalgic for a national community that assumes a healthy social order depends as much or more on individual self-discipline (individual virtue) as on governmental protections of justice, however defined.

I am nostalgic for a time when a leader like Francis Asbury could be the most influential religious leader of his era.

Most of all, I am nostalgic for something that may never exist until time shall be no more: A self-consciously Christian social order guided by the best traditions of the most thoughtful engagement with Scripture that offers as much liberty and as many paths to social well-being for those who do not share the Christian faith as for those who do.

A final word must return to thank my four reviewers: Leigh Schmidt for providing such a useful alternative to my general interpretation of American history, Dennis Dickerson and Gary Dorrien whose works I have leaned on so heavily, and Amanda Porterfield for forcing me to think very hard about why we have different interpretations of the same historical phenomena. Together, they have raised the right kind of perceptive questions that make me think I should have altered at least some of what I had written or—God forbid—written a longer book.

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