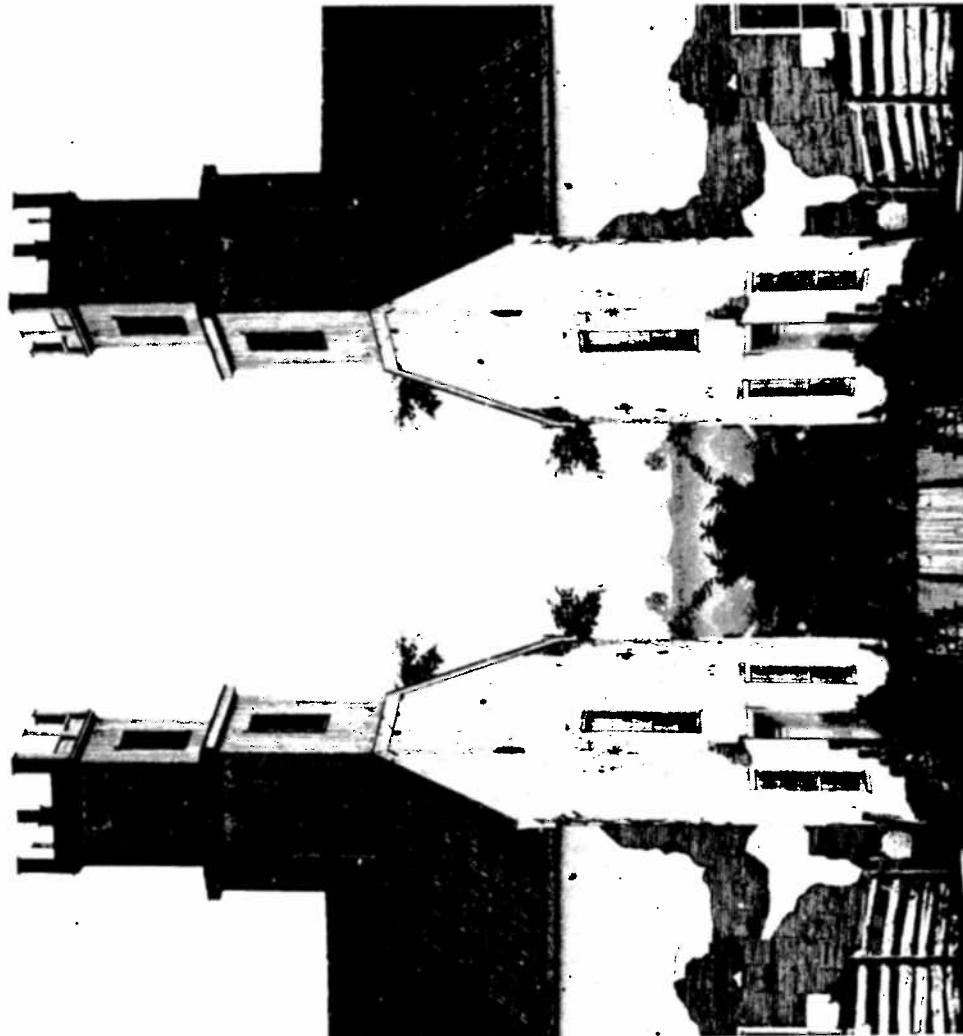


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THE CIVIL WAR — as a — THEOLOGICAL CRISIS

Introduction

In the uncertain days of late 1860 and early 1861, the pulpits of the United States were transformed into instruments of political theology. Abraham Lincoln, the president-elect, continued to insist that he would follow through on the platform of the Republican Party to prohibit forever the spread of slavery into new United States territory. On December 20, delegates to a special convention in Columbia, South Carolina, voted to secede from the Union. The other states of the Deep South seemed sure to follow, and those of the Upper South and border South likely to do so. In such dire circumstances, Americans looked to their preachers for instruction from God.

Ministers throughout the United States responded confidently. The will of God, as revealed first in the Scriptures and then through reflection on the workings of divine providence, was clear. Or at least it was clear to the ministers as individuals, many of whom were eager to raise a trumpet for the Lord. As a group, however, it was a different story, for the trumpets blown so forthrightly were producing cacophony. On no subject was the cacophony more obvious, and more painful, than on the question of the Bible and slavery. On no subject did the cacophony touch such agonizing depths as on the question of God's providential designs for the United States of America.

The Bible and Slavery

Whether the Union should be preserved was everywhere acknowledged to be the political question of the hour, but only inference or deduction could discern a message in the Bible concerning the specific fate of the United States of America. By contrast, on slavery, which everyone knew was the economic, social, and moral issue on which the political question turned, it was a dif-

ferent matter. The Bible, or so a host of ministers affirmed, was clear as a bell about slavery.

The Bible, for example, was clear to Henry Ward Beecher, the North's most renowned preacher, when he addressed his Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn, New York, on January 4, 1861, a day of national fasting called to have the people pray for the country's healing. In Beecher's view, the evil for which the United States as a nation most desperately needed to repent, "the most alarming and most fertile cause of national sin," was slavery. About this great evil, the Bible could not speak with less ambiguity: "Where the Bible has been in the household, and read without hindrance by parents and children together — there you have had an indomitable yeomanry, a state that would not have a tyrant on the throne, a government that would not have a slave or a serf in the field."¹

But of course the Bible spoke very differently to others who also rose to preach in that fateful moment. Six weeks earlier at a day of fasting called by the state of South Carolina, the South's most respected minister, James Henley Thornwell, took up before his Presbyterian congregation in Columbia the very same theme of "our national sins" that Beecher would address before the Congregationalists of Brooklyn. To Thornwell, slavery was the "good and merciful" way of organizing "labor which Providence has given us." About the propriety of this system in the eyes of God, Thornwell was so confident that, like Beecher, he did not engage in any actual biblical exegesis; rather, he simply asserted: "That the relation betwixt the slave and his master is not inconsistent with the word of God, we have long since settled. . . . We cherish the institution not from avarice, but from principle."²

The fact that Beecher in the North and Thornwell in the South found contrasting messages in Scripture by no means indicates the depth of theological crisis occasioned by this clash of interpretation. Since the dawn of time, warring combatants have regularly reached for whatever religious support they could find to nerve their own side for battle. Especially in our postmodern age, we think we know all about the way that interests dictate interpretations. It was, therefore, a more convincing indication of profound theological crisis when entirely within the North ministers battled each other on the interpretation of the Bible. In contrast to the struggle between Northern theologians and Southern theologians, this clash pitted against each other ministers who agreed about the necessity of preserving the Union and who

also agreed that the Bible represented authoritative, truth-telling revelation from God.

Thus only a month before Beecher preached to the Brooklyn Congregationalists about the monstrous sinfulness of slavery, the Reverend Henry Van Dyke expounded on a related theme to his congregation, Brooklyn's First Presbyterian Church, just down the street from Beecher's Plymouth Congregational. But when Van Dyke took up the theme of the "character and influence of abolitionism," his conclusions were anything but similar to Beecher's. To this Northern Presbyterian, it was obvious that the "tree of Abolitionism is evil, and only evil — root and branch, flower and leaf, and fruit; that it springs from, and is nourished by, an utter rejection of the Scriptures."³ So clear to Van Dyke were the biblical sanctions for slavery that he could only conclude that willful abolitionists like Beecher were scoffing at the Bible's authority.

An even more interesting contrast with Beecher's confident enlistment of the Bible against slavery was offered by Rabbi Morris J. Raphall, who on the same day of national fasting that provided Beecher the occasion for his sermon, addressed the Jewish Synagogue of New York. Like Van Dyke's, his sermon directly contradicted what Beecher had claimed. Raphall's subject was the biblical view of slavery. To the learned rabbi, it was imperative that issues of ultimate significance be adjudicated by "the highest Law of all," which was "the revealed Law and Word of God." Unlike the addresses from Thornwell and Beecher, Raphall's sermon was filled with close exegesis of many passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. Significantly, this Northern rabbi was convinced that the passages he cited taught beyond cavil that the curse pronounced by Noah in Genesis 9 on his son Ham had consigned "fetish-serving benighted Africa" to everlasting servitude. Raphall was also sure that a myriad of biblical texts demonstrated as clearly as demonstration could make it that slavery was a legitimate social system. Those texts included passages from Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.⁴ Raphall's conclusion about the scriptural legitimacy of slavery per se reflected his exasperation at anyone who could read the Bible in any other way: "Is slaveholding condemned as a sin in sacred Scripture? . . . How this question can at all arise in the mind of any man that has received a religious education, and is acquainted with the history of the Bible, is a phenomenon I cannot explain to myself."⁵ As we shall see, Raphall had more things to say on the subject because he contended

that much in the Bible argued against slavery as it was practiced in the United States; but on the issue of the legitimacy of the institution, narrowly defined, the New York rabbi was definite.

One of the many Northerners with a good religious education who knew the Bible very well, yet in whose mind questions did arise about the intrinsic evil of slaveholding, was Tayler Lewis, a Dutch Reformed layman and since 1838 a professor of Greek and oriental studies, first at New York University and then at Union College. In an essay that was originally published as a direct rejoinder to the Presbyterian Van Dyke and the Jew Raphael, Professor Lewis complained that "there is . . . something in the more interior spirit of those [biblical] texts that [Van Dyke] does not see; he does not take the apostles' standpoint; he does not take into view the vastly changed condition of the world; he does not seem to consider that whilst truth is fixed, . . . its application to distant ages, and differing circumstances, is so varying continually that a wrong direction given to the more truthful exegesis may convert it into the more malignant falsehood."⁶ Given the extreme emotions of the day, Lewis was relatively charitable about what he considered Rabbi Raphael's misreading of the Hebrew Scriptures. He was more concerned to show the errors in Van Dyke's use of the Christian New Testament to defend slavery. Stated in its simplest form, Lewis's contention was that "there is not a word in the New Testament about buying and selling slaves."⁷ And since buying and selling slaves was intrinsic to the American slave system, the New Testament obviously condemned that system.

So it went into April 1861 and well beyond. The political standoff that led to war was matched by an interpretive standoff. No common meaning could be discovered in the Bible, which almost everyone in the United States professed to honor and which was, without a rival, the most widely read text of any kind in the whole country.

Providence

Clashes over the meaning of the Bible on slavery were matched during the era of the Civil War by an equally striking division in what the nation's most widely recognized religious thinkers concluded about the workings of divine providence. Confident pronouncements about what God was "doing" in and through the war arose in profusion from all points on the theological com-

pass. Yet as with debates over the Bible and slavery, interpretations of divine providence differed materially depending on the standpoint of the one who identified how God was at work.

An extreme example of such difference is provided by a pair of discourses from April 1861 and April 1862, which were similar in their learning, conviction, and religious passion, but otherwise strikingly at odds in opinions about what God intended for the slave system of the United States. In the *Southern Presbyterian Review* of April 1861, John H. Rice offered a comprehensive explanation for the existence of the Southern states that was based almost exclusively on the workings of providence. To Rice, it was obvious that the slave system – which he described as foisted on the Southern colonies by New England's mercantile greed and Britain's callous imperialism – had entered on hard times after the Revolutionary War and was by about 1815 nearing a crisis. Because the crisis was caused by the presence of a large and restive black slave population, it "could not be solved by any scheme of abolition, emancipation, or colonization." At that bleak hour, "the providence of God opened the door of safety, by the operation of causes originating at points distant from each other by the whole length of the continent and the width of the broad Atlantic." The "almost simultaneous" invention of the cotton gin in Connecticut and the spinning jenny in Britain, along with the opening of fertile cotton-producing land in America's new Southwest, was manifestly God's way of overcoming the crisis. After that remarkable conjunction of events, the South had flourished, with the only threat to its prosperity occasioned by "the foolish and wicked meddling of men" who attacked those "to whom God in His providence, has committed [the institution of slavery for] its guidance and control." From this history, according to Rice, the South had taken the lesson "never to consent that her social system . . . be confined and restrained by any other limits than such as the God of nature intends." Slavery, in a word, had developed under "certain providential conditions" that Rice discerned as clearly as he saw "the wonderful providence of God" that had led first to the European colonization of America and then to the unexpected victory of American patriots in the War of Independence.⁸

One year later, Daniel Alexander Payne, presiding bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, preached a sermon in Washington, D.C., in order to celebrate the Union legislation that ended slavery in the federal district but also to urge his fellow African American Methodists to make the

best of their newfound freedom. To Payne, it was as clear as it had been to Rice what God was about, although what he saw was the opposite of Rice's perception. "Who has sent this great deliverance?" was Payne's query. "The answer shall be, the Lord; the Lord God Almighty, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." Only "thou, O Lord, and thou alone couldst have moved the heart of this Nation to have done so great a deed for this weak, despised and needy people!"⁹

The manifest contradiction in these two interpretations of providence, which was multiplied on every hand during the war years, was not the most telling feature of the appeal to providence. Rather, that most telling feature was the confident assurance with which those appeals were made. This widely shared confidence was, ironically, a major reason for the shallowness of providential reasoning during the war. It was also a feature suggesting that providential reasoning marked a crucial turning point in the broader history of American thought.

As with the question of the Bible and slavery, the American perception of providence also has a history. Unpacking that history is the best way to make sense of how providential reasoning worked during the war and then of why the exercise of such providentialism factored so significantly in the later intellectual history of the United States.

The Shape of This Book

The purpose of this book is to explain why clashes over the meaning of the Bible and the workings of providence, which grew directly out of the nation's broader history before the Civil War, revealed a significant theological crisis. Although I hope that the book will indicate why serious attention to religion can add greatly to an understanding of the origin, the course, and especially the intensity of the Civil War, my main purpose is to show how and why the cultural conflict that led to such a crisis for the nation also constituted a crisis for theology.

The inability to find a univocal answer in Scripture to the pressing question of slavery troubled Americans for more than thirty years – from, that is, at least the early 1830s, when the rise of a more radical abolitionism precipitated a responding defense of slavery as a positive good, to the end of the war in 1865, when the success of Union arms rendered further exegetical de-

bate pointless. Why this clash over the interpretation of Scripture – a clash that helps explain the intense religious fervor displayed on both sides – was so important in the broader sweep of American religious history is the issue I address in chapter 3. In chapter 4 this theme is carried further in order to explore the specific confusion that resulted when what the Bible said (or did not say) about race was subordinated to what it said about slavery. Then in chapter 5 the question turns to why widespread American belief in divine providence – the belief that God ruled manifestly over the affairs of people and nations – added fuel to the crisis, particularly as interpretations about God's actions in and through the Civil War came to clash as fundamentally as did interpretations of God's written Word, the Scriptures.

These discussions of the Bible and of providence expand on arguments I have made before.¹⁰ Chapters 6 and 7, by contrast, push into terrain that is mostly new to me and, it appears, to other historians of the Civil War. In an effort to probe wider dimensions of the American theological crisis, I have tried to discover what opinion from outside the United States concluded about the state of American religion as reflected in the War between the States. In this effort I am trying to gain for American history of the mid-nineteenth century some of the benefits that have accrued so richly to historical study of the colonial and revolutionary periods from viewing the New World in constant conjunction with the Old. This investigation has revealed two divergent streams of foreign commentary. The first, from European and Canadian Protestants, as well as from Europe's liberal Roman Catholics, featured intense religious conviction about the evils of slavery and the urgent need to end the slave system in the United States. It is a noteworthy literature for revealing much stronger opinions against slavery than for the North. It is also noteworthy for providing almost no evidence, even from the most theologically conservative sources, that these non-Americans endorsed what so many American Protestants believed concerning the Bible's legitimization of slavery.

The second strand of foreign commentary, from conservative European Catholics, is in some ways more interesting. It features wide-ranging comparisons between societies built on Protestant foundations and those in which Catholicism prevailed. It is noteworthy both for asserting forthrightly that the Bible does sanction slavery and for bluntly challenging commonly accepted American ideals of individual liberty. What is also striking about

From these path-clearing discussions, the book turns in chapter 2 to outline the historical contexts that explain why the conflict concerning Scripture and providence revealed such a large-scale crisis. Debates in the 1860s over what the Bible taught and what God was doing in history always also concerned how Scripture and providence had been perceived in the decades before the war.

Studying Religion in the Era of the Civil War

On the question of how the Civil War influenced the general course of American intellectual life, a number of historians have made particularly significant contributions. Yet most of that good work has concentrated on how a relatively few Northern intellectuals or members of the upper classes were pushed by the war toward exchanging traditional religious convictions for more secular perspectives. Thus as long ago as 1965 George Fredrickson showed how among these elites the war hastened the acceptance of rational business planning over decentralized local autonomy, promoted pragmatic and practical views of the self over Emersonian transcendentalism, and led to the prestige of scientists over the authority of clergymen.¹¹ Similarly, in 1992 Anne Rose concluded that for a significant group of well-born men and women whom she called "Victorians," "the Civil War was a cornerstone in [their] redefinition of sacred values in secular terms."¹² More recently, Alfred Kazin has suggested that Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address in 1865 marked the "culmination" of the "age of belief" in the United States, which very soon thereafter began to recede.¹³ Louis Menand has also argued that for Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and a rising cadre of Northern intellectuals, the war precipitated "a failure of ideas" that undermined the confident "beliefs and assumptions of the era that preceded it" as thoroughly as similar beliefs were later undermined by World War I and the war in Vietnam.¹⁴

Such provocative studies shed little direct light on the nature of religious thought among people for whom the war did not secularize traditional beliefs, but rather intensified them or left them undisturbed. Yet here we are talking about the vast majority of Americans, at least as indicated by those who expressed in some public way their opinions concerning the meaning of the conflict. Their standpoint is the focus of this book. To see why examining the thought of traditional religious believers is critical for understanding the

such commentary is that it challenges common American opinion of the mid-nineteenth century by learnedly defending the Catholic Church as the guardian of true liberty. Because this strand of foreign Catholic opinion supplied significant intellectual resources for American Catholics as they responded to the era's crisis, chapter 7 broadens slightly to include a review of the recent scholarship that has so splendidly illuminated American Catholic attitudes before and during the Civil War.

The payoff from even a preliminary assessment of foreign religious commentary is to add intriguing, but usually neglected, voices to the moral battles that raged as fiercely as the era's political and military conflicts. Even more, it is to gain a number of perceptive interpretations of American religious life and religious thought that, because they did not share convictions common to most Americans, offered unusually provocative assessments of where that life and thought were headed. As with the examination of domestic attitudes about Scripture and divine providence, so too the examination of foreign religious opinion on the American conflict is designed to probe religious reasoning about the War between the States with the same seriousness that legions of Civil War scholars have brought to bear on other aspects of the conflict, and with such striking success.

Foreign observers saw more clearly than most Americans what was at stake when interpretations of Scripture and understandings of providence divided this particular people beyond hope of resolution. American national culture had been built in substantial part by voluntary and democratic appropriation of Scripture. Yet if by following such an approach to the Bible there resulted an unbridgeable chasm of opinion about what Scripture actually taught, there were no resources within democratic or voluntary procedures to resolve the public division of opinion that was created by voluntary and democratic interpretation of the Bible. The Book that made the nation was destroying the nation; the nation that had taken to the Book was rescued not by the Book but by the force of arms.

BY WAY of further introduction, it is important to make preliminary comments about the study of religion in Civil War history, about the state of religion itself in the United States during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and about how the theological history of the Civil War compares to the theological history of other military crises in modern Western history.

Civil War as a whole, it is useful to sketch the general situation of religion in mid-nineteenth-century America.

After a long period of unwarranted neglect, the nation's majority religious populations circa 1860 are now being examined in a gratifying surge of serious scholarly work. Major histories of the Civil War by, for example, Phillip Paludan and Allen Guelzo, have included full treatment of religious developments during the conflict.¹⁵ Although James McPherson neglected religious matters in his monumental *Battle Cry of Freedom*, a book that was superb in every other respect, he has more recently published significant materials supporting his own view that "Civil War armies were, arguably, the most religious in American history."¹⁶

On several fronts, a growing number of historians are pursuing the broader challenge that McPherson posed when he wrote, "Religion was central to the meaning of the Civil War, as the generation that experienced the war tried to understand it. Religion should also be central to our efforts to recover that meaning."¹⁷ Many of the recent contributions to the never-ending river of Civil War-era biographies, for example, give religious matters an emphasis that is proportionately much closer to the place it occupied in the subjects' lives.¹⁸ Welcome, too, is the serious biographical attention now being paid to at least some of the era's major religious figures, including due justice to their part in the sectional conflict.¹⁹ After decades in which the close scrutiny of religion in the Civil War was limited to only a few lonely scholars like Lewis Vander Velde, James Silver, James Moorhead, and Gardiner Shattuck,²⁰ recent years have witnessed a flourishing of religious themes in studies written or coordinated by, among others, John McGivigan, Mitchell Snay, Randall Miller, Harry Stout, Charles Reagan Wilson, Steven Woodworth, and Kent Dollar.²¹

Close-grained attention to the war years has been wonderfully supplemented by major studies documenting the central role of religion in developments during the antebellum period that led to secession and the outbreak of armed conflict. Among such works, pride of place must be given to the magisterial study of religion and antebellum politics by Richard Carwaine, but works of nearly similar scope have appeared from, among others, McGivigan, Snay, Eugene Genovese, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Drew Gilpin Faust, Kenneth Stapp, John Daly, and Michael O'Brien.²² Also of note are studies of Civil War-era sermons produced by David Chesebrough²³ and ones

that have appeared in several responsible popularizations for a broader reading public.²⁴ This quick bibliographical celebration does not take into consideration the great boost that is being given to debate over the religious meaning of the war by very new works, including Harry Stout's moral history of the Civil War and the long-awaited study of the South's slaveholding classes from Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese.²⁵

A different kind of stimulus was provided by the movie *Gods and Generals*, which came out in 2003. If it could be charged with romanticizing the brutality of combat and ignoring the larger moral questions that brought on the war, the film nonetheless did capture some religious aspects of the conflict more accurately and more extensively than any big-budget Hollywood film has ever done before.²⁶

This brief survey has not mentioned many of the other relevant works in the flood of Civil War literature that continues to pour from the presses.²⁷ But it should indicate that serious consideration of theology in the Civil War is now riding the crest of a historiographical wave.

Religion in the Era of the Civil War

It is important to be clear about why this recent burst of scholarship meets a fundamental historical need. The United States in 1860 was not uniquely religious, but it was nonetheless, and by almost any standard of comparison, a remarkably religious society. Comparisons are imperative for making this point. In 1860 between a third and two-fifths of Americans were formal members of churches. By itself, that number is not overly impressive since today about two-thirds of Americans claim church membership.²⁸ Much more impressive about that earlier period, however, is that the rate of adherence — of people participating regularly in church life — was probably double the rate of membership.²⁹ Today, by contrast, only a little more than half of the Americans who claim membership in a religious body regularly attend their places of worship.

Two especially significant realities about American religion in 1860 are also best defined comparatively. First is the fact that religion was then much more important than any other center of value at work in the country; second is the fact that American religion was still mostly Protestant. On the first point, churches, church attenders, and religious societies were not, proportionately

considered, all that much more numerous or widespread than they are now. But almost all other institutions and agencies of culture with which we are now familiar were much smaller than they have become. Richard Carwardine put the matter well in his study of religion and politics before the Civil War when he concluded that during the mid-1850s "over 10 million Americans, or about 40 percent of the total population, appear at that time to have been in close sympathy with evangelical Christianity. This was the largest, and most formidable, subculture in American society."³⁰

Other comparisons that highlight the great significance of religion in the 1860s risk mindless statistical overkill, but they are nonetheless intriguing.³¹ Consider, as an example, the scale of organized religion vis-à-vis the scale of the federal government.

- In 1860 about 4.7 million American men voted in the decisive presidential election, but during that same year at least three (and maybe even four) times that many men, women, and children were regularly in church on any given Sunday. In the 2004 presidential election, about 115 million adult Americans went to the polls, which was roughly the same number of Americans who attended a religious service on any given day of worship.
- In 1860 there were about as many Methodist clergy as U.S. postal workers. Today the ratio of postal workers to Methodist clergy is about nine to one.
- In 1860, before mobilization for the Civil War, the number of active duty U.S. military personnel was about half the number of the nation's active clergymen. In the early twenty-first century, before mobilization for war with Iraq, the ratio of military to clergy was about three to one.
- In 1860 the income of the nation's churches and religious voluntary societies came quite close to matching the total receipts of the federal government. Today the ratio of annual federal income to annual religion-related giving is about twenty-five to one.

Mention of the federal budget opens up considerations of other economic matters.

- In 1850 the total value of all church property in the country was pegged by the census at over \$87 million, and in 1860 at over \$169 million. Of all American industries, only the railroads enjoyed greater capital investment.

- In 1860 there were in the United States thirty-five churches for each banking facility; today there are four churches for each banking facility.

The central role of religion for both intellectual and popular culture offers more to consider.

- In 1840 each person in the United States received on average six pieces of mail through the postal system, which was about one-third the total number of sermons that each person, again on average, heard during the year.³²
- In 1860 there were about 400 institutions of higher learning in the country, all but a bare handful of them run by religious organizations.
- Only a few years earlier, the *Methodist Christian Advocate* was pleased to tell its readers that of the fifty-four oldest colleges in the United States, fifty-one were presided over by clergymen. They were somewhat less pleased to report that forty of the fifty-one clergymen were Presbyterians or Congregationalists.³³
- In 1860 the only well-organized postgraduate education that extended its concerns beyond narrow professional qualification was provided by the nation's theological seminaries.

In short, the importance of religion for American society in 1860 lay partly in its wide dispersion. Even more, it resided in its overwhelming presence when compared with other institutions of government, culture, education, and the media that have grown so vast in American society since the close of the Civil War. As a promoter of values, as a generator of print, as a source of popular music and popular artistic endeavor, and as a comforter (and agitator) of internal life, organized religion was rivaled in its impact only by the workings of the market, and those workings were everywhere interwoven with religious concerns.³⁴

The second important point about religion in the mid-nineteenth century concerns its makeup, which in 1860 was still overwhelmingly Protestant. To be sure, the religious pluralism for which the United States is justly renowned was already in place, no less among Protestants as in the rapidly growing number of Roman Catholics, Mormons, Jews, and other non-Protestant groups. But we need to bear in mind how very Protestant most religion remained in the United States at the start of the Civil War.

The 1860 census reported that there were seventy-seven Jewish places of worship in the United States, which represented a doubling from only ten years earlier. The number of Roman Catholic places of worship had risen even faster, from about 1,200 in 1850 to over 2,500 in 1860. Nevertheless, the nation's formal religious life was dominated by Protestant institutions, with over 83 percent of the value of church property, over 92 percent of the seating accommodations in houses of worship, and over 95 percent of the churches themselves (about 50,000 of them). A finer-grained analysis shows that the main denominational families of Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterians – that is, the largest representation of evangelical, British-descended Protestantism – accounted for about 55 percent of the value of all church property, nearly 72 percent of all the seats available in churches, and almost 75 percent of the churches themselves.³⁵ Pluralism, both intra-Christian and among religions more generally, was definitely on the rise in 1860. But the reality on the ground in most regions of the country was still overwhelmingly Protestant, and Protestant of a readily identifiable evangelical type.

Given this Protestant demography, and given intense Protestant engagement with the moral arguments that led to war, it is hardly surprising that the fortunes of war deeply affected Protestant thinking. What did not occur during the American Civil War, however, was what had in fact occurred at a number of other times and places in Western history when traumatic conflict was joined to intense religious commitment.

Warfare and Theological Depth

Warfare – and the more cataclysmic the better – has sometimes been the mother of theological profundity. As a prime example, more than a millennium of European history was decisively influenced by Augustine's *City of God*, a book prompted by the broodings of a Roman colonial over the sack of the Eternal City. A surprisingly large number of other great theological enterprises also received critical impetus from the tumults of war. Thomas Aquinas, for one, was spurred to his monumental labors against the backdrop of the thirteenth century's ideological and military conflicts with Islam. John Calvin published successive editions of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* directly in response to conditions created by the French civil wars of the

mid-sixteenth century. Many of the theological standards of the Reformation era – including, the Lutherans' Augsburg Confession, the Catholics' Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, the Helvetic Confessions of the Swiss Reformed churches, the Scots' Confession, and the Westminster Confession of the English Puritans – arose directly out of armed, as well as doctrinal, controversy. One of the most widely distributed Protestant confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, was commissioned to resolve doctrinal, rather than military, strife, but it entered into the depths of the Dutch psyche during a dreadful period of all-out war with Habsburg Spain. In the twentieth century, there would have been no dialectical theology of neo-orthodoxy from Karl Barth without World War I and no "theology come of age" from Dietrich Bonhoeffer without the Hitler terror.

If cataclysmic military conflict has played a direct role in producing theology of high quality for intellectual elites, it has also sometimes produced profound Christian reflection among the people at large, especially in hymns that, through arising from specific circumstances of wartime devastation, nonetheless feature compelling general commentary on the nature of existence under God. A range of still vital hymnody from the crusading era – like Bernard of Cluny's "Jerusalem the Golden" (twelfth century) – illustrates this potential for popular theology. It is most clearly seen, however, in the literary harvest of the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) with hymns like Martin Rinkart's "Now thank we all our God" (1636), Georg Neumark's "If thou but suffer God to guide thee" (1641), and Paul Gerhardt's "Holy Ghost, dispel our sadness" (1648) – all of which were composed against the backdrop of unspeakable military devastation.³⁶

To these generalizations about the theological fecundity of warfare, the most cataclysmic war in the history of the United States is an exception. The Civil War and the political-social-religious conflicts that preceded it do not seem to have stimulated deep theological insights from either elites or the masses. Hymns arising from the time of national conflict can indeed still warm the heart – like James Russell Lowell's "Once to Every Man and Nation" (1844), George Duffield's "Stand Up, Stand Up, for Jesus" (1858), Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" (1862), or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" (1864). Before their cause went down, Southerners were similarly moved by hymnlike songs such as Henry Timrod's "Ethnogenesis" (1861). But such hymns never appealed to believers

outside the nation (or region) in which they were written, and they possess scant theological gravitas.

In the composition of elite theology, a similar situation prevails. The Civil War provoked incredible religious energy, with virtually all the nation's foremost theological minds toiling diligently to fathom both the ultimate meaning of the conflict and, more grandly, Ultimate Meaning itself as illuminated by the light of exploding shells and the flames devouring towns, fields, and factories. In surprisingly large measure, however, the religion with which theologians emerged from the war was essentially the same as that with which they entered the war. Despite the conflict's horrific character and the way it touched personally many of America's greatest religious thinkers, the conflict seems to have pushed theologians down the roads on which they were already traveling rather than compelling them to go in new, creative directions.³⁷

It is remotely possible that theology only appears thin during the Civil War because of a lack of attention by historians. Neither of two closely related questions has ever been studied with anything like the seriousness each deserves: First, how was the Civil War interpreted as a theological event at the time? Second, what contribution did the Civil War make to the history of theology more generally? The paucity of interest in these issues is astounding in light of the overwhelmingly Christian population of both North and South, the centrality of religious argument in justifying the existence and the actions of both the Union and the Confederacy, and the substantial Christian presence that remains in the United States to this day. Regrettably, what historian Richard Wolf wrote many years ago is still true: "No comprehensive treatment of 'Christian' interpretations of the Civil War has yet appeared, much less a theological analysis in depth of the national crisis."³⁸ Work has hardly even begun on the more comprehensive question of how the immense quantity of theological reflection brought on by the war related to the more general history of American religious thought. Despite the absence of serious historical investigation, however, we can surmise that lack of attention to theological profundity in the Civil War is almost certainly related to the fact that there simply existed so little theological profundity. This book is an effort to explain why.

Historical Contexts

The most important first step toward understanding the Civil War as a theological event is to recognize how reasoning about the war reflected longstanding habits of mind.¹ For more than a century before 1860, American theologians had been uniting historical Christian perspectives with specific aspects of American intellectual experience. The ubiquitous Christian reflection on the war followed trails blazed in the late eighteenth century and then set firmly in place by a confluence of intellectual forces during the early years of the Republic. A culturally powerful combination of intellectual ingredients gave American theologians their categories for apprehending sectional controversy and the war itself. For the most numerous and most public American religious groups, biblical Protestantism of a primarily evangelical cast provided the religious content of the synthesis. Despite tumultuous conflicts with each other, these Protestants shared a number of fundamental convictions that grew directly out of their American experience.

Religious Habits of Mind

The convictions can be summarized succinctly, though each was deeply rooted in a thick network of historical events and time-tested ideology. Evangelical Protestants of British background agreed in their practice on a very great deal:

- ▶ They exalted the Bible instead of tradition or clerical elites as the basic religious authority.
- ▶ They were skeptical about received religious authority.
- ▶ They emphasized both the activity of grace in their lives and the need for lives of gracious activity.

- ▶ They practiced discipline of self and others.²
- ▶ They regarded Roman Catholicism not as an alternative Christian religion but as the world's most perverse threat to genuine faith. To most American Protestants, Catholicism seemed as alien to treasured political values as it was antithetical to true Christianity.³
- ▶ They were culturally adaptive. Since most American Protestants treated ideas and institutions as possessing primarily instrumental value, by comparison with the ultimate realities of the gospel, they felt free to take up, modify, discard, or transform inherited ideas and institutions as local circumstances dictated.⁴

American theologians never talked about these practices in naked religious terms. Rather, the evangelical Protestantism that dominated public life at midcentury had gained its place because it successfully clothed the Christian faith in the preeminent ideological dress of the new Republic. In particular, it had vivified, ennobled, and lent transcendent value to republican political assumptions, democratic convictions about social organization, scientific reasoning pitched to common sense, and belief in the unique, providential destiny of the United States.

More particularly, America's leading Protestant theologians first argued convincingly that the people of the United States stood in a covenantal relationship with God. For most of them, a vocabulary of corporate repentance and renewal, handed down from the Puritans, remained an appropriate vocabulary for addressing the American public about its privileges and duties before God. An indication of the enduring power of covenantal reasoning was public acceptance of the numerous fast days proclaimed in both the North and the South. Although Northern Democrats came to protest Abraham Lincoln's proclamations calling for such days as partisan Republican propaganda, they were otherwise well received.⁵ Ironically, in the South, where a tradition designated as "the spirituality of the church" had frowned on the mixture of politics and religion, the similar days proclaimed by President Jefferson Davis were even more eagerly embraced. For both North and South, the template for these national religious observances was the time-honored pattern of covenant, as taken over from a reading of the Old Testament: repent and God may reverse evil days; give thanks and He may allow the propitious times to continue.

Second, with other American intellectuals, theologians assumed that a republican calculus could account for the relationship between private character and public well-being. No matter how plastic moral categories became, theologians took for granted that connections between virtue and liberty, on the one side, and vice and tyranny, on the other, were fixed, determinative, enduring, and—of greatest significance—transparent.⁶

Third, and most important for understanding patterns of biblical interpretation, religious thinkers also shared in the American appropriation of the Enlightenment. In particular, they assumed that perceiving the causes and effects of political developments was a simple matter, once distracting traditions had been set aside. In keeping with Enlightenment confidence, they also assumed that human beings of the right sort possessed a nearly infallible ability to perceive clear-cut connections between moral causes and public effects.⁷

During the years of conflict, countless believers illustrated such convictions by assuming that moral or spiritual perception could be crystal clear and that the means of moral action lay entirely within the grasp of well-meaning individuals. Thus in 1860 the Kentucky Presbyterian Robert Breckinridge told readers how they could discover the essence of a Christian church: "If the world, and more especially the children of Christ, would follow simply and earnestly the light of reason . . . and the teachings of that divine word, which he has given to be a map unto our feet . . . it is not easy to imagine how the least obscurity could hang over such a question."⁸ In 1861 the Brooklyn Presbyterian Henry Van Dyke expressed bewilderment when he pondered how abolitionists could read the Bible as they professed to read it: "When the Abolitionist tells me that slaveholding is sin, in the simplicity of my faith in the Holy Scriptures, I point him to this sacred record, and tell him, in all candor, as my text does, that his teaching blasphemes the name of God and His doctrine."⁹ That very year, however, the abolitionist Gerrit Smith thought it was just as uncomplicated to come to the opposite conclusion: "The religion taught by Jesus is not a letter but a life. So simple is it that the unlearned can both understand and teach it . . . The true religion is too simple to make the training of a theological seminary necessary for those who teach it. We should allow the wisdom and goodness of God to assure us that the religion which He has given to the world must correspond in its simplicity with the simplicity of the masses."¹⁰ From the South in that same year the

Baptist Thornton Stringfellow expressed the opinion that since God's intentions were clearly expressed in the Bible, they were readily available to all; benevolence to Stringfellow was, in Drew Faust's summary, "a 'simple' matter of explicating the Bible and guiding men in following its dictates."¹¹ In December 1864 the Presbyterian Independent of New York felt that the problem of caring for liberated slaves could be easily solved: "In effect the problem is simple, and its solution comparatively easy. The question of labor is settled at once by the excess demand over supply. The question of individual regeneration is determined by those familiar appliances which have raised the American character in the Free States to its present altitude."¹² The implicit trust that the Bible was a plain book whose authoritative deliverances could be apprehended by anyone who simply opened the covers and read was expressed by Phoebe Palmer, the holiness evangelist, like this in 1865: "The Bible is a wonderfully simple book; and, if you had taken the naked Word of God as . . . your counsel, instead of taking the opinions of men in regard to that Word, you might have been a more enlightened, simple, happy and useful Christian."¹³

Nowhere was the Christian-Enlightenment marriage more clearly illustrated than in the pervasive belief that understanding things was simple. The significance of this marriage was far-reaching. On the one side, it bestowed great self-confidence as Americans explained the moral urgency of social attitudes and then of national policy. On the other, it transformed the conclusions reached by opponents into willful perversions of sacred truth and natural reason. The combination of biblical faith and Enlightenment certainty imparted great energy to the builders of American civilization. It also imparted a nearly fanatical force to the prosecution of war.

With respect to one other important dimension of antebellum life, most American believers also accommodated themselves to the assumptions of a market economy. To be sure, numerous Southern ministers questioned the free rein given to markets, and not a few in the North were cautious about their workings as well.¹⁴ In general, though the bond between religion and the market was strong, it was probably not as strong as the alliance between religious values and Enlightenment, covenantal, and republican values.

Theological reasoning during the Civil War rested on this grand intellectual alliance. Yet a significant weakness of the remarkable synthesis was revealed when it proved unable to unify the nation's sectional interests. So it

came about that the Civil War precipitated intellectual-religious, as well as domestic, fratricide. Several decades ago, Perry Miller rightly perceived the "unity amid diversity which sustained the majority of American Protestants" in antebellum decades, but which also "makes the Civil War the more poignant, for it was fought, not by Puritans against Cavaliers nor by republicans against royalists, but among the rank and file, all children of the Revival."¹⁵ More recently, the Canadian philosopher and social critic Charles Taylor has highlighted the same conflict: "This is a country whose common values were from the beginning organized around certain defined ideas, understandings of freedom: what has been described as a 'public philosophy.' It is a country, moreover, where the crucial inner battles, in particular the literal and bloody struggle of the Civil War, were fought in the name of interpretations of this philosophy."¹⁶ The story of theology in the Civil War was a story of how a deeply entrenched intellectual synthesis divided against itself, even as its proponents were reassuring combatants on either side that each enjoyed a unique standing before God and each exercised a unique role as the true bearer of the nation's Christian civilization.

An even larger problem than the division of the United States' Christian-intellectual heritage against itself, however, was the confidence of religious thinkers in claiming to describe the simplicity of God's action in the world. The particular difficulty posed by this confidence was its timing in relationship to broader developments in Western intellectual history. American religious thinkers were expressing such confidence, that is, precisely at the moment when Western culture was being pushed powerfully away from the habits of the evangelical-Enlightenment synthesis. By clinging so tightly to the shared values hammered out in the new nation's cultural history, religious thinkers made it all the more difficult to adjust to the changes brought on by new intellectual developments at midcentury and in the following decades. Large claims for evolution, critical contentions about ancient biblical texts, and the dynamics of a burgeoning industrial economy soon pressed hard on all religious believers. In the 1850s and early 1860s, however, most Americans of faith were far less concerned about adjusting to impending intellectual change than they were about dealing with contradictory biblical conclusions arising from a common application of the interpretative methods they had embraced in earlier American history.

The Structure of Biblical Interpretation

In the United States in 1860, debates over the interpretation of the Bible took on an immense significance. It was not only that so much of the religious ground was occupied by Protestants, with their inherited loyalty to Scripture as ultimate religious authority, but also that this ground was occupied by the specific type of Protestants that had flourished in the new American nation.

Conflict over the interpretation of the Bible was vitally important in 1860 – both for the public at large and for the fate of theology – because of how American culture had been shaped from the time of the Revolution onward. When, that is, Henry Ward Beecher, James Henley Thornwell, and their ministerial colleagues squared off over the meaning of the Bible, the stakes were anything but merely academic or privately sectarian. Rather, their clash presented a radical challenge to one of the fundamental supports of American civilization. This support was trust in the Bible as a divine revelation that, besides fulfilling traditional religious functions, also enjoyed a critical public presence. By 1860 a substantial majority of articulate Americans had come to hold a number of corollary beliefs about the Bible – specifically, that besides its religious uses, it also promoted republican political theory, that it was accessible to every sentient person, that it defined the glories of liberty, that it opposed the tyranny of inherited religious authority, that it forecast the providential destiny of the United States, and that it was best interpreted by the common sense of ordinary people. The ideological journey from 1776 to 1861 was complicated, but even a brief sketch of it will suggest why, on the eve of sectional warfare, conflict over Scripture was so politically, socially, morally, and culturally – as well as religiously – explosive.

Anti-traditionalism. The United States was brought into existence by men who deliberately rejected the authority of tradition in forming the new country. It was not precedent, history, or inherited dicta that pointed the way to an independent nation, but “truths [considered] to be self-evident.” Churches that clung to the past, like the Episcopalians in their fastidiousness about tradition or even the Congregationalists in their hankering for church-state establishment, rapidly lost ground to the churches that celebrated the new nation’s birthright of liberty. By the 1860s other religious bodies with a higher respect for tradition, including Catholics, Lutherans, and Jews, had

established a foothold in America, but most of them still spoke with a foreign accent that rendered their public presence incommensurate with their actual numbers.

Republicanism. As deliberately as they rejected political traditions, the founding fathers also committed themselves to republican ideals of political life. Republicanism was always easier to evoke than to define, but for most Americans through the time of the Civil War, it usually meant, on the one side, virtuous character and action linked with political liberty and the flourishing of society and, on the other side, vice (usually defined as luxury, indolence, or deceit in high places) linked with corruption in government, tyrannical politics, and the collapse of social order. In the crucible of heated imperial conflicts that led up to the War of Independence, colonial Protestants reversed the settled judgments of their European ancestors, who regarded republicanism as tantamount to religious heresy, and embraced a republican vision of politics. After this nation-defining war, the American denominations that expanded most rapidly were the ones that most successfully presented themselves as both traditionally Christian and faithfully republican.

Written instruments of government. As they went about creating a new nation, the founding fathers put their trust in written instruments of government, especially the new U.S. Constitution. Where in Europe fundamental authority and political stability had been supplied by hereditary power, monarchy, and the aristocratic ordering of society, in the United States authority and stability came from constitutional principle. Correspondingly, in religious life, the groups that flourished after the unstable years of the 1780s and early 1790s were those that trusted the Bible rather than hereditary ritual, top-down ecclesiastical authority, or aristocratic control over the interpretation of religious experience. In regard to the connection between political trust in a written Constitution and religious trust in the Bible, it is pertinent to note that James Henley Thornwell was not only the South’s most effective defender of slavery on the basis of the Bible but also one of the South’s most powerful defenders of secession as a strictly constitutional step.¹⁷

Ideological evolution. In a series of interwoven ideological moves, the Protestant churches that after 1800 burgeoned in the American landscape, and

that after 1830 came to exert such a pull on public life, adjusted their inherited theological convictions to what might be called the new rules for public discourse in the infant American nation. In ethics, they traded the traditional Augustinian view, which considered true virtue as a gift of God limited to the regenerate, for a view associated in the eighteenth century with Francis Hutcheson of Scotland, which considered virtue as a live possibility for all peoples on the basis of natural endowments from God. On the question of human capacity specifically, there was a change of equal magnitude. The movement was away from a conservative definition of human freedom as constrained by human character, such as articulated in the mid-eighteenth century by both the Anglican Arminian Samuel Johnson and the Congregational Calvinist Jonathan Edwards. The movement was toward a belief that in moral choices, as one theologian put it, humans always had a "power to choose and refuse," or as phrased by Charles Finney, the nineteenth-century's best-known revivalist, "The moral government of God everywhere assumes and implies the liberty of the human will, and the natural ability to obey God."¹⁸

As Protestant instincts evolved, they became much more democratic.¹⁹ The Baptists, the Methodists, and the Restorationists—that is, the denominations that led all the rest in mass public appeal—forthrightly championed their populist character, excelled at empowering the laity, and stimulated continuing resentment at anyone else's efforts to manage religion or politics from on high. Other groups, like the Quakers and the Congregationalists, who were less resolutely democratic in practice, nonetheless went even further than their antiformalist contemporaries in propounding democratic theory, with the result that by the 1830s Quakers and Congregationalists were leading all denominations in opening space for women to exercise public religious authority.²⁰ Catholics, Lutherans, Mormons, and even Presbyterians, who remained in principle opposed to simple democracy, nonetheless found their practices pulled along by the democratic tide.

Finally, while other ideological changes were taking hold, the entire religious population of the United States wholeheartedly embraced the Enlightenment spirit I have described above. While for the most part rejecting Enlightenment notions when they were linked to David Hume's skepticism, the deism of French philosophers, or William Godwin's social radicalism, Americans nevertheless came to share the Enlightenment confidence that

they could explain connections between public states of affairs and the virtues and vices that propelled public action. Soon romantic notions would come to influence America as well, but in their belief that the workings of the world—both physical and moral—were wide open to the definitive assignment of cause and effect, and also that it was an essentially simple matter to figure out such relationships, America's religious spokespersons long remained fully convinced of the truths of the Enlightenment.²¹

The cumulative effect of these subtle ideological changes was to convince an ever-broadening number of Christians in the United States that they had the power within themselves to discover the true meaning of sacred texts, the power to see things in general as they really were, the power to act effectively against those in the wrong, and the power to choose righteously when faced by moral dilemmas—if, that is, they would only put their minds to the task.

Creation of an American culture. The American Constitution, in the memorable phrase of John Murrin, created "a roof without walls." It set up a national government but did little to nurture a national culture. Even with the Constitution in place, Murrin suggests, "American national identity was . . . an unexpected, impromptu, artificial, and therefore extremely fragile creation."²² The eventual construction of a national identity, or a national culture, involved many factors, but one that contributed almost nothing was the religion practiced by the founding fathers themselves. Their ideal for providing the morality required by a republican project was religion defined as judicious, refined, restrained, and (at least for Thomas Jefferson and John Adams) Unitarian. In addition, the founders thought the action (or non-action) of government would play a large role in building national culture. Federalists believed that direct governmental programs could do the job, while Democratic-Republicans held that preventing the government from acting would accomplish the same purpose.

In the event, what actually happened was that citizens, without paying much attention to government at all, went about creating a national culture for themselves. Long before political parties became effective as national, democratic institutions, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians were building the nerve system of a national culture. Their labors were strengthened immeasurably by the creation of voluntary societies, most of them religious

in nature, that began to proliferate from the first decade of the nineteenth century. Market economics moved with similar dynamism at the grass roots. With the confluence of economic and religious forces, Americans were developing what we call today "civil society." They were themselves establishing structures that mediated between, on the one hand, individuals and local communities and, on the other, the nation. It was a bottom-up process in which direction from presidents, bishops, or even presbyters was not needed.

In retrospect, we can see that the ability of religious denominations to help form a national culture depended on the separation of church and state, the unprecedented step that had looked so risky to so many in the 1790s. The strongest churches of prerevolutionary times, Congregationalist and Anglican, had been supported by colonial governments, and only because of the need for compromise at the Constitutional Convention did disestablishment begin to carry the day in the new nation. But once begun, disestablishment unleashed tremendous energy. The churches that most eagerly embraced the separation of church and state – again, Baptist, Restorationist, and Methodist – expanded rapidly and set a tone for the whole nation. The churches that gloried in disestablishment were the ones that benefited most from the libertarian legacy of the Revolution. They were the ones best able to exploit commonsense forms of reasoning in the vacuum created by discredited intellectual traditions. They were the ones best equipped to meet the religious needs of a population fanning out into the incredibly vast spaces of the American interior. Disestablishment, in other words, represented the negative means that allowed voluntary religious organizations to shape culture in the free spaces of the New World, just as the positive practice of establishment had allowed the state-churches of Europe to shape culture in the traditional spaces of the Old World.

In 1838 a veteran Methodist, Nathan Bangs, with long experience as an itinerant, an editor, and a denominational organizer, paused to reflect on what Methodists – and, by extension, the whole phalanx of voluntary free churches – had achieved in the United States. Bangs asserted, correctly, that Methodists had really not been much interested in politics, and yet he thought he could see in their history an inadvertent political effect of great consequence: "The extensive spread [of Methodism] in this country, the hal-
lowing influence it has exerted in society in uniting in one compact body so many members, through the medium of an itinerant ministry, interchang-

ing from north to south, and from east to west, has contributed not a little to the union and prosperity of the nation."²³ Bangs, if anything, understated his case.

Evangelical revival. Neither ideological evolution nor the separation of church and state nor the sanctifying of American republicanism would have made evangelical Protestants important at the time of the Civil War if the United States had not witnessed from 1790 to 1860 an unprecedented dynamism within the churches considered primarily as religious institutions. Because the churches flourished in this period as purveyors of religion, as they never did before or thereafter, they exerted an unusual impact on public life. It was religion, narrowly considered, that drove an unprecedented ecclesiastical expansion – from about 700 Methodist churches in 1790 to nearly 20,000 in 1860; from fewer than 900 Baptist churches to more than 12,000; from no Campbellite or Restorationist or Disciples churches to over 2,000; from about 700 Presbyterian churches to well over 6,000. In the helter-skelter of the new nation's experience, messages from the churches made sense. Preeminently from evangelical churches, but then with rapidly accelerating influence from Catholic, Mormon, Adventist, Jewish, and sectarian communities as well, came persuasive accounts of God, the human condition, and the means for finding reconciliation with God and neighbor. During this period the evangelical churches, and then others, altered the course of American politics because they gave direction, purpose, meaning, and stability to so many American lives. And they did so North and South, for blacks and whites, for men as well as women. Only because they were so important religiously did the churches also become so important politically.

Broken churches, broken nation. One momentous by-product of religious expansion was the fact that the institutional life of the major Protestant churches worked an echoing effect on the body politic.²⁴ So it was that from quite different perspectives John C. Calhoun and Henry Clay offered identical testimony about the great schisms experienced by the Baptists and the Methodists, both in 1844. As these two great national churches split into Northern and Southern fragments, Clay opined that "this sundering of the religious ties which have hitherto bound our people together, I consider the greatest source of danger to our country."²⁵ Calhoun's similar forecast from

1850, in his last major speech before the U.S. Senate, was long remembered: that when the national bonds represented by the great Protestant denominations would all break, "nothing will be left to hold the States together except force."²⁶

THE HISTORY that I have sketched so rapidly in this chapter structured the national crisis, as well as the theological crisis, that had been reached by December 1860. During the years immediately after the Revolution, America's own church leaders wondered if they could ever recover from the shocks of war. Overseas, most European observers believed that it was impossible to maintain even a semblance of orthodox Christianity if churches were dismantled and if their leaders embraced the worldly principles of republican politics. But in the actual course of events, American churches promoting reasonably orthodox beliefs and reasonably traditional practices flourished precisely because they adapted so energetically to the republican freedoms won in the War of Independence, guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, and then expanded considerably with the opening of the new country. The positive connection between evangelical religion and republican public life had been observed already by Alexis de Tocqueville in the mid-1830s: "America is . . . the place in the world where the Christian religion has most preserved genuine powers over souls; and . . . the country in which [the Christian religion] exercises the greatest empire is at the same time the most enlightened and most free."²⁷

Although Tocqueville in the 1830s was struck by how well the American experiment in Protestant republican Christianity was turning out, the situation in 1860 was more ominous. Both North and South, evangelical Protestants, who believed that the Bible was true and who trusted their own interpretations of Scripture above all other religious authorities, constituted the nation's most influential cultural force. By 1860 religion had reached a higher point of public influence than at any previous time in American history. Moreover, religion had become vitally important because the nation's evangelical churches and its evangelical voluntary associations had contributed so much to the construction of national culture. They had achieved such prodigies, in large part, by relying on Scripture as the highest and most compelling authority.

Yet in American society as a whole, there was no recognized authority

greater than the individual interpretation of Scripture to deploy for the purpose of understanding the Scriptures. And in 1860 fundamental disagreement existed over what the Bible had to say about slavery at the very moment when disputes over slavery were creating the most serious crisis in the nation's history. The same level of disagreement existed among evangelicals about how to interpret the providential actions of the God they worshiped in nearly identical terms.

If we keep in mind that it was never only a matter of interpreting individual biblical texts, but always a question of putting actively to use the authoritative Book on which the national culture of the United States had been built, then we are in a position to understand why in 1860 battles over the Bible were so important, why divergent views of providence cut so deeply, and why foreign commentary on the Civil War illuminated so much about the general character of religion in America.