between colorblind biblical slavery and black-only American slavery, a revolution in the nation's racial attitudes would have been necessary, and that revolution would have demanded a greater alteration in accepted convictions than the American War of Independence itself. Even the Civil War that preserved the Union, that broadened out to the Emancipation Proclamation, and that led to the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments did not persuade most Caucasian Americans that African Americans were on their level of humanity. To have carried the country in 1860, the argument that a racially discriminatory slavery was a different thing from slavery per se would have required the kind of commitment to racial antiprejudice that the nation only accepted, after immense struggle, late in the twentieth century – if in fact it has accepted it even now. Advocates of emancipationist biblical arguments who in 1860 still wanted to keep blacks out of the territories and still expected colonization to solve the United States's race problem – not to speak of those who felt that the whole of the Bible sanctioned the whole of the American slave system – were not prepared to let a bare reading of the Bible overcome centuries of inherited race prejudice.

In sum, the theological crisis involving the Bible and slavery had several components:

- a failure to examine biblically the Southern charge that individualistic consumer capitalism was an ethically dangerous economic system;
- a blow to Christian orthodoxy caused by the abolitionist flight to the "spirit" of Scripture;
- an inability to act on biblical teaching about the full humanity of all people, regardless of race; and
- a confusion about principles of interpretation between what was in the Bible and what was in the common sense of the culture.

Even more than the obvious fact of incompatible interpretations of a commonly honored Bible, this set of difficulties constituted the theological crisis of the Civil War.

Chapter 5

The Crisis over Providence

Standard Christian teaching about God's control of the world and all events taking place in the world sprang vigorously to life as the dramatic events of the war unfurled. Belief that God controlled events had always been foundational wherever biblical religion prevailed. Yet in nineteenth-century America confidence in the human ability to fathom God's providential actions rose to new heights. When the prevalence of religious conviction was added to widespread self-confidence in the powers of human perception, assessment, and interpretation, the result was a flourishing of providential reasoning. Americans thought they could see clearly what the world was like, what God was like, what factors drove the world, who was responsible for events, and how the moral balance sheet should be read. They were children of the Enlightenment as well as children of God.

In such a situation, clarity about the workings of divine providence posed a particular problem because God appeared to be acting so strikingly at odds with himself. As with clashes over the interpretation of Scripture, the conflict in understanding providence was disconcerting by itself. Even more, the assumptions on which the interpretation of providence was based seemed to be flawed, thus pointing to a profound theological crisis.

The Workings of Providence

Immediately as war approached, theologians turned instinctively to God as the one who would decide the outcome. In January 1861 James Henley Thornwell of South Carolina carefully laid out the constitutional case for secession in order to demonstrate that if armed struggle arose, it would be because of the North's wrongdoing, not the South's. His concluding word, however,

was providential: "We prefer peace – but if war must come, we are prepared to meet it with unshaken confidence in the God of battles."[1]

At the end of the war, the same confidence remained. But when Horace Bushnell expressed it at the Yale College commencement in July 1865, he dramatically reversed Thornwell's assurance about who and what it was that God was fighting for:

> In these rivers of blood we have now bathed our institutions, and they are henceforth to be hallowed in our sight. Government is now become Providential, – no more a mere creature of our human will, but a grandly moral affair. . . . We have not fought this dreadful war to a close, just to put our government upon a par with these oppressive dynasties [of old Europe]! We . . . owe it even to them to say, that a government which is friendly, and free, and right, protecting all alike, and doing the most for all, is one of God's sacred finalities, which no hand may touch, or conspiracy assail, without committing the most damning crime, such as can be matched by no possible severities of justice.[2]

In the North euphoria at the end of the war was everywhere expressed in similarly ardent providentialist language. John Williamson Nevin, the noted German Reformed theologian from Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, provided a typical performance with his Fourth of July address at Franklin and Marshall College in 1865. To Nevin the path of events could lead to only one conclusion: "The war, reaching out to the world-astounding issue in which it has now come to its close, stands revealed to our faith emphatically as God's work, just because it has been to so small an extent the result of any commensurate wisdom, or calculation, or plan on the part of men; and just because so large an amount of human corruption and error, to say nothing of Satanic wickedness, has entered into it all along, as to make it truly wonderful that the better powers still involved in it should ever have been able to triumph as they have done in the end." To Nevin, the North's lack of preparation for war, the many advantages enjoyed by Southerners fighting on their own terrain, the inexperience of Abraham Lincoln, and many other factors pointed toward Northern defeat. These were the very circumstances that now prepared his mind for "the great thought, namely, that our national deliverance has been wrought out for us, as a world-historical act, by God himself. . . . God has done great things for us, whereof we are glad; and this, itself, is our best reason for believing that he will do for us, still greater things hereafter. He will not forsake the work of his own hands."[3]

For more than a decade Nevin had been teamed with the Swiss expatriate Philip Schaff at the tiny German Reformed seminary in Mercersburg. During the summer of 1865, Schaff had returned to Europe, where before audiences in Germany and Switzerland he presented a view very similar to Nevin's. The recent history of the United States, with the great effusions of blood and the tremendous sacrifices demanded on all sides, was of a place "where the hand of God has visibly and wondrously led events to a happy end."[4] At the Yale commencement that summer, Bushnell used the same pattern of reasoning to foresee a great future for the United States: "The unity now to be developed, after this war-deluge is over, . . . will be no more thought of as a mere human compact, or composition, always to be debated by the letter, but it will be that bond of common life which God has touched with blood; a sacredly heroic, Providentially tragic unity, where God's cherubim stand guard over grudges and hates and remembered jealousies, and the sense of nationality becomes even a kind of religion."[5]

Of course, the hand of God did not look the same to an unrepentant Southerner. John Adger, editor of the *Southern Presbyterian Review* and, after the death of Thornwell, one of the main figures to whom Southern Christians looked for theological guidance, was also writing immediately after the war about the manifold course of God's providence. Adger went to great lengths to insist on "the justice of the Southern cause," but he also conceded that "there was one error . . . into which we acknowledge that some Southern ministers sometimes fell." The mistake was to believe "that God must surely bless the right." But what Southerners had forgotten was the lesson of history that God often let "the righteous . . . be overthrown." Despite the fact that the North was guilty of "a cruel, unjust, and wicked war of invasion upon free States . . . urged on, in great part, by an infidel fanaticism," and despite the fact that godly ministers "prayed fervently for the Success of the Confederacy," it still remained the case that "the result was with God alone." Because of this error, so Adger acknowledged, the faith of many in the South was shaken. But to Adger the explanation was clear: "We accept the failure of secession, as manifestly providential. The overthrow of that just cause made evident not so much the prowess of its foes, nor even their prodigiously superior resources, as it did the direct hand of the Almighty." And so to Adger

the only possible conclusion was that God was chastening his people for their good. "Yes! the hand of God, gracious though heavy, is upon the South for her discipline."[6]

The idea that God used the destruction of war to discipline or chasten his people revived one of the standard themes of the Puritan jeremiad, which was often evoked in these years, but usually with less directly partisan purposes than in Adger's account. The Northern Episcopal church provided a notable instance of such jeremiad reasoning in the pastoral letter that its presiding bishop, Charles Pettit McIlvaine, sent out in the fall of 1862. McIlvaine began by quoting the Psalms to indicate how "unsearchable" were God's ways, but then he expounded at some length on how he understood them to be operating. The letter did address what McIlvaine called "*the agency of men*" in starting the war, by which he meant primarily the South's illegal rebellion. But mostly it explained why the Northern Episcopalians should understand that the war "comes *from the Providence of God.*" In particular, it was "His visitation and chastening for the sins of this nation." Those sins were primarily personal not political: profaneness, neglect of public worship, ungodliness, and, especially, rejection of Christ. In that desperate hour, McIlvaine's solution was spiritual. If repentance occurred – along with prayer, cultivation of holiness, and active support for the local parish – divine blessing would follow: "Search and try yourselves that you may duly humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, and He may, in due time, exalt us out of the present distress."[7]

The assumptions behind McIlvaine's reasoning stood behind many other pronouncements during the war. For instance, Daniel Alexander Payne told his African Methodist Episcopal congregation in Washington that even noncombatants could decisively influence the war's outcome by wielding "a power in behalf of the Government which neither rifled cannon, nor mortar, nor rocket-battery can assail, nor bomb-proof walls resist. *That power* is the right arm of God – of God, who lifts up and casts down nations according as they obey, or disregard the principles of truth, justice, liberty."[8] A circular letter from the Philadelphia Baptist Association expressed a similar, though even more strictly spiritual, confidence in God's ability to bring good out of the war's evil. The letter's author was uncertain about short-term prospects for the Kingdom of God, but not about what would happen ultimately: "We

are sure that the cause of our Redeemer will in the end be advanced by these upheavings."[9]

As natural as it was for Christian believers to speak of providential rule over spiritual concerns, it was almost as instinctive for Americans in this era to see the divine rule over terrestrial matters as well. God was thought to be especially concerned about the fate of republican government. In March 1865, as desperate Southern leaders labored to sustain their fight, the editor of the *Army and Navy Messenger* from Shreveport, Louisiana, exhorted the troops with a view of divine power that was as distinctly republican as it was distinctly Christian: "The character of the war is, with us, essentially and necessarily religion. . . . In its simplest form, the war with us [is] for freedom of conscience – freedom to interpret the Bible and worship God according to the dictates of our own consciences."[10]

A similar ideology of republican providence spoke to very different ends in the North. On Sunday, April 23, just over a week after Abraham Lincoln's death, Henry Ward Beecher preached one of that day's most memorable memorial sermons. Not surprisingly, Beecher's understanding was quite different from the Shreveport editor's: "Republican institutions have been vindicated in this experience as they never were before; and the whole history of the last four years, rounded up by this cruel stroke, seems now in the providence of God to have been clothed with an illustration, with a sympathy, with an aptness, and with a significance, such as we never could have expected or imagined. God, I think, has said, by the voice of this event to all nations of the earth, 'Republican liberty, based upon true Christianity, is firm as the foundation of the globe.'"[11]

Secure, unequivocal readings of providence extended very broadly in those years. To indicate how broadly, it is instructive to look at the margins of American religious conviction. The *Christian Examiner*, a Unitarian journal from Boston, had long been accustomed to speak of God in immanent terms, as dwelling within human history, and it was equally well practiced at scorning the crude supernaturalism of the numerous evangelical sects and their unseemly lust for doctrinal orthodoxy. Yet the war worked atavistically on the Brahmin Unitarians who ran the *Examiner*. In May 1865 they affirmed that in the early days of Abraham Lincoln's presidency "it seemed almost as if a special miracle had been wrought to keep [him] from the hands of murderers";

they spoke of secession and states' rights as "that heresy"; and they ascribed the end of slavery ("one of the great social revolutions of all history") to the direct "appointment of Providence."[12]

A more famous outlier made even firmer references to providence at just about the same time. Ralph Waldo Emerson had been asked to provide the annual lecture in Concord, Massachusetts, to mark April 19 and the start of the American Revolution, when the assassination of the president offered him topical instead of historical material for his address. Emerson's deity was by no stretch of the imagination the traditional Christian God, but that deity was nonetheless the one who had given the United States a leader like Lincoln in its hour of need:

> There is a serene Providence which rules the fate of nations, which makes little account of time, little of one generation or race, makes no account of disasters, conquers alike by what is called defeat or by what is called victory, thrusts aside enemy and obstruction, crushes everything immoral as inhuman, and obtains the ultimate triumph of the best race by the sacrifice of everything which resists the moral laws of the world. It makes its own instruments, creates the man for the time, trains him in poverty, inspires his genius, and arms him for his task.[13]

Just as certain about the ways of God, but with an entirely different religious compass, was George Q. Cannon, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Writing in early 1863, Cannon felt that the only thing that could account for the great destruction of the war was "that God has withdrawn his Spirit from [the Americans'] midst and turned their wisdom into folly, leaving them to the uncontrolled devices of their own hearts." Thus far, Cannon said no more than many others. But Cannon's explanation for why God had removed his Spirit was singular. In 1846, shortly before being killed by a mob in Alton, Illinois, Joseph Smith had stood for president of the United States. During his campaign, Smith had outlined how he would end slavery through compensated emancipation, drastically cut back the officers and budget of the national government, and in general bring peace and prosperity to the country. To Cannon, Smith's candidacy had been God's provision so "that the people might have the opportunity of accepting a servant of God, if they wished, to stand at the head of the nation, who possessed a sufficient knowledge of the Lord and his purposes to steer the ship of state

out of the troubled sea in which she was then sailing, to a haven of peace." Instead of accepting this divine gift, however, the people did with Joseph Smith what Jesus predicted would always happen to his prophets. They rejected and then killed him. The result was that the people of the United States were left "without excuse." Now in the Civil War they were reaping what they had sown: "The Lord is proving to the inhabitants of the earth that he is God and that he cannot be trifled with. If they reject him and his messages of mercy, and are determined to take their own course, they must endure the awful consequences. . . . Dearly indeed have the enemies of the truth in the United States purchased their imaginary triumph over the Prophet Joseph and those associated him." In murdering Smith, "they did as Satan always prompts the rebellious children of earth to do – maltreat and kill those who would save them."[14]

So it was that a similar picture emerged from both the religious margins and the religious mainstream. American believers, with the sureties of their religion backed by the sureties of the Enlightenment, offered direct, simple answers to explain the war. Moreover, what was clearly seen could also be controlled; knowing what God was doing imparted confidence that Americans could align themselves with the course of events. They also felt that the war reconfirmed their singular destiny as a divinely chosen people. With these convictions, the chorus, though singing different notes, sang them all in the same way.

Slavery in Providential View

Like so many other dimensions of the war, the understanding of providence had slavery at its crux. As we saw in chapter 4, providence was the central motif in James Henley Thornwell's account, written in the opening months of the war, of why the slave system did not violate Christian principles of human rights. "Other men – . . . Englishmen . . . Frenchmen . . . his master, for example," are akin to the slave, he said, in one respect; God has "qualified him [the slave] to meet the responsibilities" that he has been assigned: the slave has been placed at a level fitted to his capacities. Thornwell was confident of this reasoning because he was confident in God: "The truth is, the education of the human race for liberty and virtue, is a vast providential scheme, and God assigns to every man, by a wise and holy decree, the precise

place he is to occupy in the great moral school of humanity. The scholars are distributed into classes, according to their competency and progress. For God is in history."[15]

Opponents of slavery were just as convinced that "God is in history." Especially after the war they were not afraid to spell out how that divine superintendence had done its work. In the view of the Reverend G. I. Wood from Guilford, Connecticut, God had acted unilaterally to end the evil:

> Our position, just prior to the outbreak of the rebellion, was one of unexampled embarrassment. The Republic was nearly undermined and overthrown by the insidious influence of a social institution, in its very nature antagonistic to the distinctive principles of a free government. We were divided, enervated, corrupted, controlled, and distracted by slavery. . . . How was the nation to be exorcised of this evil spirit? What human wisdom could devise a way for the solution of this complicated problem? . . . Slavery had a kind of charmed existence. The nation could not touch it – the States would not. God only could, and He did.[16]

A very similar opinion, but this time backed by a full discussion of the Christian doctrine of providence, came from Charles Hodge of Princeton Theological Seminary as part of a major tribute to Abraham Lincoln that he published in the July 1865 number of the *Princeton Review*. As Hodge explained it, "the scriptural doctrine of Providence" contained four elements:

- First, the existence of the external world. Hodge was not a philosophical idealist in the style of Bishop Berkeley or Jonathan Edwards.
- Second, "the efficiency of secondary causes." Hodge believed that humans and also "material substances" had "properties or forces inhering in them" that allowed them to cause actions in the world.
- Third, the action of "proximate . . . causes" in all events, except miracles. Hodge was affirming that it was appropriate for Christians to describe all ordinary events as themselves resulting from an ordinary sequence of cause and effect.
- Fourth, over and surrounding all events, an omnipresent and active divine presence. "God, as an infinite and omnipresent spirit, is not a mere spectator of the world, looking on as a machinist upon the machine which he has constructed; nor is he the only efficient cause, so that all effects are to be referred to his agency, and so that the laws of nature are only the uniform methods of his operation; but he is everywhere present, upholding all things by the word of his power, and controlling, guiding, and directing the action of second cause, so that all events occur according to the counsel of his will."

In Hodge's view, it was necessary to affirm both that humans acted with genuine freedom and that, under God, "nothing happens by necessity or by chance." In his summary, Hodge maintained that God "governs free agents with certainty, but without destroying their liberty, and material causes, without superseding their efficiency."[17]

Hodge was offering a sophisticated perspective that updated for the wrenching contingencies of 1865 the subtle providential theology found in the Presbyterians' Westminster Confession of Faith from the seventeenth century.[18] Yet, as Hodge expounded on current events, he was not able to escape the American longing for beneficent certainty. It was thus as clear to Hodge as it was to his theological confreres what God had done and why he had done it. The South's desire to perpetuate "a system so fraught with evil" in the end provoked "the Divine displeasure." The result of that provocation was the "universal overthrow of slavery within the limits of the United States. This is one of the most momentous events in the history of the world." And what brought it about? "That it was the design of God to bring about this event cannot be doubted." Hodge affirmed that despite foreign and domestic predictions of the Confederacy's success and the continuation of slavery, "God . . . ordered it otherwise." It was, therefore, the responsibility of faithful Christians to accept "the inevitable difficulties and sufferings consequent on such an abrupt change" since they resulted from "the design of God in these events."[19]

Hodge's reasoning recapitulated a common pattern. If natural causes (that is, God's mediated control over events) seemed to point in one direction and yet something different happened, commentators leapt to the conclusion that God's unmediated actions must be the explanation, rather than a previously overlooked set of mediated causes. Or, as the Kentucky Baptist J. M. Pendleton put it, since emancipation took place despite what President Lincoln had first desired, despite the general will of the nation, and despite the balance of American political power – "this being the case, it is evident that

the overthrow of slavery was not man's work. There was a God in heaven, presiding over all, and causing 'the wrath of man to praise Him,' accomplishing His purpose by thwarting the designs of men, and even using them as instruments in His hands. The overthrow of American slavery was an epoch in the world's history, and it is the providence of God that creates epochs."[20]

Providence for the Nonelite

It would require a much fuller discussion than can be offered here to demonstrate that the reasoning of intellectual elites was shared broadly among the people at large. But ordinary folk also found it easy to reduce the complexities of the war to simple, if sharply contrasting, providential calculations. James Lynch, a minister and editor in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, saw clearly that "the hand of Providence was in the election of Mr. Lincoln to the Presidency" and then, four years later, that "Divine Providence" had ensured that "the deliverance of the slave from bondage [was] the *sine qua non* of the deliverance of the nation from the consuming fires of rebellion."[21] Mattie White Read, whose husband served with Stonewall Jackson, affirmed forthrightly in June 1862, "I believe that God leads Jackson and Jackson his men, just where it is best they should go." Her only worry was "that people are in danger of worshiping Gen. Jackson instead of God, who rules over all. If we idolize him, he will be taken from us."[22] Lydia Maria Child, a widely read New England author who moved in very different circles from Mattie Read White, nonetheless took comfort at the war's development because of the same kind of confidence. In the North's dark days of December 1862, she asserted that "human hands blunder shockingly; but the Divine Hand is overruling all in infinite wisdom." Her response was the same when she heard the fateful news of mid-April 1865:

> The assassination of our good President, shocked and distressed me. Yet I have been so deeply impressed by the wonderful guidance of Providence during this war, that five minutes after I heard the sad news, I said, "Dreadful as this is perhaps it is only another of the wonderful manifestations of Providence. The kind-hearted Abraham, was certainly in danger of making too easy terms with the rebels. Perhaps he has been removed, that he might not defeat his own work, and that another, better calculated to carry it to a safe and *sure end*, might come into his place."[23]

William Taylor, a Unionist from East Tennessee, worked from the same cast of mind when in 1867 he resigned from his Primitive Baptist Church in Enon because of the church's persecution of him during the war. His brief against his former congregation was its failure to see the hand of God: "I will now give it to you as my honest opinion that when rebellion took place against the government of the United States, that the great god of the world was not pleased with it. If he had[,] his arm was sufficient to have carried them [Confederates] through, as he did Moses through the [Red] sea."[24] At just about the same time that William Taylor penned these words, Fanny Dowling wrote a poem, "The Land We Love," that became very popular among the very sort of Confederates whom Taylor was lecturing about the workings of God. As Dowling put it in her composition titled "The Land We Love":

> Man did not conquer her, but God
> For some wise purpose of his own
> Withdrew his arm; she, left alone,
> Sank down resistless 'neath his rod.
>
> God chastens most who he loves best,
> And scourges whom he will receive.[25]

The life of Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson together with religious opinion surrounding his life and death illustrate the depth of such providentialist thinking among ordinary Americans. Jackson, who was anything but ordinary in his military capacities, was also probably not ordinary in his profound trust in providence, which he expressed with astonishing frequency and fervency. Early in his adulthood, he started peppering his speech and correspondence with phrases like "an all-wise Providence" and "the hand of an all-wise God."[26] When in 1851, Jackson was incapacitated by illness at the same time he was appointed to the faculty of the Virginia Military Institute, a friend asked him if his illness did not indicate he should turn the post down. Jackson's reply was untypical only in spelling out at length what was his constant habit of mind: "The appointment came unsought, and was therefore providential; and I knew that if Providence set me a task, He would give me the power to perform it. So I resolved to get well, and you see I have. As to

the rest, I knew that what I willed to do, I could do."[27] As James Robertson's fine biography shows, Jackson was almost incapable of accounting for any event or outcome during the war itself without referring it to God's sovereign direction. After the dreadful fighting of the battle of Second Manassas, an aide observed to Jackson that the Confederates "have won this battle by the hardest kind of fighting." Jackson, who had worked during the battle like a whirlwind, would not hear of it: "No, no, we have won it by the blessing of Almighty God."[28]

Not surprisingly, when Jackson died from wounds suffered at the battle of Chancellorsville in the spring of 1863, common people throughout the nation (as well as elites) instinctively sought the divine meaning in the passing of someone who had so consistently ascribed to God the rule over daily life. Yet what would that message be? As the historian Daniel Stowell shrewdly observes, "For a people committed to the belief that an omnipotent God controlled the destiny of men and of nations, Jackson's death was a spiritual crisis."[29] Some thought that Jackson's death was a result of sin, usually ascribed to the South and only rarely to Jackson. Some held the death was intended as a lesson to teach submission to God's will. The pious Northern general O. O. Howard thought God was intending to bless the Union cause with victory. In contradiction, some Southern ministers proclaimed that removing Jackson was a providential means of stripping away human props so that the glory for the South's forthcoming victory would be given to God alone. Only a few confessed that it was entirely a mystery. After the war, and indeed after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln had evoked a comparable flurry of assured but incompatible interpretations of God's purposes, a few attempts were made to add nuance to earlier certainties. But as both Jackson himself and reaction to Jackson's death demonstrated, ordinary ministers and the laity were as convinced as the elite theologians that God was in control and that they could understand clearly why God was acting the way he did.

Holdouts

Against this chorus of certainty, there were very few holdouts. Working directly against the grain, these observers modified the usual pattern. Most thought provoking among this small minority were those who, while not abandoning a firm belief in God, began to question their own ability to read the divine determinations.

So it was with General Edward Porter Alexander, chief of the South's artillery, who campaigned with Stonewall Jackson in 1862 and 1863. Writing long after the fact, Alexander complained about the willingness of several key Southern leaders to believe "that there *was* this mysterious Providence always hovering over the field & ready to interfere on one side or the other, & that prayers & piety might win its favor from day to day." Alexander was not so much impious as practical: "It was a weakness to imagine that victory could ever come in even the slightest degree from anything except our own exertions." Specifically, Alexander held that Stonewall Jackson's reliance on providence, combined with his rigorous Sabbatarianism, had led to neglectful passivity during the Seven Days' Battles of late June 1862: "I think that the one defect in General Jackson's character was his religious beliefs. He believed with absolute faith, in a personal God, watching over all human events with a jealous eye to His own glory—ready to reward those people who made it their chief care, & to punish those who forgot about it. And he specifically believed that a particular day had been set aside every week for the praise of this God, & that a personal account was strictly kept with every man as to how he kept this day." With such reasoning Alexander was not in sympathy. His conclusion was as forthright as it was untypical: "It is customary to say that 'Providence did not intend that we should win.' But Providence did not care a row of pins about it. If it did, it was a very unintelligent Providence not to bring the business to a close—the close it wanted—in less than four years of most terrible and bloody war."[30]

Alexander's disdain for Jackson's providentialism was very much a minority viewpoint during the war. Perhaps even less common was the occasional admission that an observer simply could not make out what God was doing in and through the war. But we do know more about this viewpoint since it was the one that Abraham Lincoln gradually came to express as the war went on. I have written elsewhere about the contrast between Lincoln's view of providence and the view of providence accepted by most of the era's formally recognized religious thinkers.[31] But it is worth noting again that Lincoln, a layman with no standing in a church and no formal training as a theologian, nonetheless offered a complex picture of God's rule over the world and a morally nuanced picture of America's destiny. By contrast, most

of the country's recognized religious leaders offered a thin, simple view of God's providence and a morally juvenile view of the nation and its fate.

To be sure, early in his presidency Lincoln sounded much like his contemporaries. At his first inaugural in 1861, for instance, he invoked the divine purpose as if it were an easy matter to grasp its intentions: "If the Almighty Ruler of nations, with his eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North, or on yours of the South, that truth, and that justice, will surely prevail, by the judgment of this great tribunal, the American people."[32] Yet there was also in Lincoln's personal development a more complicated view of how God directed the world. In an autograph fragment that Lincoln's secretaries and later editors, John Nicolay and John Hay, dated to October 1858, the future president meditated on God's will with respect to slavery. This fragment included a sharp critique of Frederick A. Ross, whose *Slavery Ordained of God* (1857) had made the conventional biblical defense of slavery. Lincoln's response pointed to the power of personal interest in determining biblical conclusions: "If he [Ross] decides that God Wills Sambo to continue a slave, he thereby retains his own comfortable position; but if he decides that God will's Sambo to be free, he thereby has to walk out of the shade, throw off his gloves, and delve for his own bread. Will Dr. Ross be actuated by that perfect impartiality, which has ever been considered most favorable to correct decisions?" But before he delivered himself of this judgment, Lincoln paused to confess a difficulty that few of his pious contemporaries could recognize: "Certainly there is no contending against the Will of God; but still there is some difficulty in ascertaining, and applying it, to particular cases."[33]

Once the war actually began, this deeper sense of providential mystery developed even further. As early as 1862, the idea was rising that perhaps the will of God could not simply be identified with American efforts to preserve the Union. Such thoughts Lincoln committed to paper in September 1862, at one of the darkest moments of the conflict. As Union armies suffered another series of defeats, he began seriously to ponder the radical step of proclaiming the emancipation of slaves in the Confederacy. At that time he penned a "Meditation on the Divine Will," which his secretaries later recalled was meant for Lincoln's eyes alone:

> The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God can not be *for*, and *against* the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party – and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true – that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either *saved* or *destroyed* the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.[34]

Significantly, at about the same time that Lincoln wrote this meditation, he offered a specific reading of providence to guide a course of action, evidently something he had not done before and would not do again. In September 1862, after the battle of Antietam provided just enough good news for Lincoln to move against slavery in the Confederate states, he explained to his cabinet how he was confirmed in this decision. Here are the notes that Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles recorded at that time: "He had made a vow, a covenant, that if God gave us the victory in the approaching battle, he would consider it an indication of divine will and that it was his duty to move forward in the cause of emancipation. It might be thought strange that he had in this way submitted the disposal of matters when the way was not clear to his mind what he should do. God had decided this question in favor of the slaves. He was satisfied that it was right, was confirmed and strengthened in this action by the vow and the results."[35]

More typical of Lincoln's presidential years was the reasoning in his "Meditation on the Divine Will." In March 1865 that form of reasoning, which was focused on the mysteries of providence, provided the most compelling theme of his Second Inaugural Address. In particular, that reasoning was responsible for transforming the central section of this speech into a theological statement of rare depth. Lincoln's statement began with a startling thesis, at least for an American speaker: "The Almighty has His own purposes." He concluded with an acknowledgment that the United States was as nothing compared to the mysterious purposes of God: "Yet, if God wills that [the war] continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn

with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether' [Psalm 19:9]."[36] Yet, despite the forcefulness of Lincoln's vision, there were few Americans who, in the end, could actually agree both that God was in control and that human observers might not know what he was doing.

Theological Agendas: Europe versus the United States

During the war years, while American theologians wrote voluminously about the conflict, they continued to comment at considerable length about other religious issues, including several matters of great moment brewing in Europe.[37] Most of their best writing appeared in the seminary journals, which as a group constituted the nation's most substantial periodicals of serious intellectual culture. That writing came from the Presbyterians Adger, Hodge, Thornwell, and Henry Boynton Smith, romantic innovators like Bushnell, the Roman Catholic Orestes Brownson, a small army of learned Congregationalists, a feisty troop of transcendentalists, and a full corps of Methodists, Lutherans, and Baptists. Especially for religious thinkers so at home with traditional Christianity, but also with Enlightenment conceptions of the world, the ideas coming from Europe opened unsettling possibilities. Thus during the war several journal articles explored the cosmological implications of scientific proposals from Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and Charles Lyell's *The Geological Evidence of the Antiquity of Man* (1863).[38] American theologians also canvassed the knotty issues of faith and history raised by Church of England progressives in *Essays and Reviews* (1860) and by Ernest Renan's radical *La Vie de Jésus* (1863).[39] They discoursed learnedly on the implications for philosophy, ethics, and Christian civilization of Henry Mansel's Bampton Lectures (1858), with Mansel's innovative effort to enlist Kant on behalf of Protestant orthodoxy.[40] In their discussion of other European developments, they also noticed Pope Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) and the questions of religious authority raised by that important document.[41]

Yet despite some cogent writing on these subjects, it is doubtful if the American theologians were taking European challenges to conventional thought seriously enough, since in the aggregate they represented a massive rebuke to the reigning American synthesis of Protestant and Enlightenment values. Against traditional Protestant views of an authoritative and self-authenticating Bible, *Essays and Reviews* questioned decorously whether it was wise to treat Scripture as uniquely transcendent or unusually perspicuous. Renan pressed home the same questions about Jesus, but with far less decorum. Against a well-honed natural theology that used science to demonstrate the power, goodness, and majesty of God, Charles Lyell opened up the troubling possibility that humans may have descended from animals, and Charles Darwin extended that challenge with his strong statement about the random character of natural selection. Against commonsensical assurance about the ability of humans to grasp things as they really were, Mansel's interpretation of Kant rested content with humans' apprehending only phenomena. And against the assumption that traditional supernatural theology could be sustained by the voluntary organizations of a liberal society, Pope Pius IX offered his reactionary, but also perceptive, account of why it was wrong to accommodate traditional Christianity with the liberal project of modern individualism.

The Europeans, in very different ways, were leaving the certainties of Enlightenment, or Christian-Enlightenment, thinking behind. They were posing for Americans questions about the adequacy of the dominant forms of religious thought in the United States, especially the hard-earned synthesis of Christianity, republicanism, common sense, the Enlightenment, and American covenantal exceptionalism. But this was exactly the framework in which both elites and nonelites described the workings of providence during the war.

To be sure, the evangelical-Enlightenment synthesis forged in the period 1776 to 1815 had come under fire before the Civil War itself.[42] Various Christian romantics had taken exception to the standard theistic mental science propounded by so many Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Baptist, Methodist, and Disciples theologians. Those challenges from Christian romantics ranged from the conservative use of European theology by John Williamson Nevin and the New York City Presbyterian Henry Boynton Smith to the literary theology of Harriet Beecher Stowe and the creative anti-Enlightenment musings of Horace Bushnell. Transcendentalism, with Ralph Waldo Emerson far in the lead, had posed a romantic challenge to theistic common sense from beyond the boundaries of Christianity. Yet none of the antebellum attempts to contest the reigning alliance of Enlightenment and Protestant convictions

were as foundational as the efforts by Darwin, Lyell, Renan, Mansel (in his use of Kant), and the other Europeans whose work was being noticed in the American quarterlies during the war.

These Europeans were blazing a trail, as it turned out, that many elite American intellectuals would follow in the 1870s and thereafter. Such figures as Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Andrew Dickson White, John Dewey, and other progressive savants wanted science liberated from theology. They sought moral judgments based on pragmatic considerations rather than on the Bible. They looked on academic work as promoting the progress of modern civilization, not as paying homage to received theological tradition. Above all, they had no use for the confident trust in divine providence that was everywhere on display in the war years.

Considered as an episode in the history of theology, the Civil War occurred during a critical transition from theological certainties that had prevailed since the early sixteenth century and toward new paths characteristic of the recent past. Some of the new paths would still be seriously Christian – though in contradictory liberal, modernist, fundamentalist, pietist, primitivist, and traditionalist varieties. But more and more intellectual leaders would be secular, agnostic, or simply uninterested in religion. And by 1890 those more secular positions – rather than revived Protestant, or Lutheran, or Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox, or traditional Jewish positions – were the ones that dominated American elite intellectual life in the way that the Protestant-Enlightenment synthesis had dominated it in 1830. One of the most important reasons for this change of convictions over time was the hallowness of providential reasoning that was everywhere on display in the War between the States.

Taking Stock

It remains to speculate on what the theologians' bold confidence in their own understanding of providence during the antebellum era and the war had to do with the major transition in general intellectual authority that occurred after the war.

From a perspective early in the twenty-first century, it is obvious that, no matter how clear the theologians of the Civil War were in their own minds about the workings of providence, they were in almost all cases powerless to convince others that they were correct, unless the others already shared their

partisan perspective on events. Religious beliefs about the course of affairs were strongly held but weak in affecting what transpired. By contrast, other forces were emerging that had, so the war convincingly demonstrated, tremendous effective power, especially the mobilization of arms and the organization of money, men, and material for industrial production. When set alongside such practical power, religious reasoning about the course of history seemed confused, simplistic, and ineffective.

On the level of personal religion, such a faltering did not occur. The war stimulated revivals in the camps both North and South, and it seems also to have increased the fervor of many on the home fronts as well. Perhaps as a result, it became easier for the great majority of Americans who retained traditional beliefs to view religion as a personal matter rather than claim its effectiveness in either the economic marketplace or the marketplace of ideas.

Some of the theologians were, in fact, developing nuanced accounts of why assured convictions varied so greatly within a population that shared basic convictions about Christianity, commonsense morality, republican values, and the special destiny of the United States. For instance, in the summer of 1865 Charles Hodge chided his fellow Northern Presbyterians for their harsh judgments of Southern counterparts. His reasoning was unusually frank and self-aware: "It is easy to say that we are right and they are wrong. This in the present case is, no doubt, in a great measure, true." But to Hodge the fact of being right or wrong was not a very good explanation of why the Northern Presbyterians upheld the Union and eventually condemned slavery, while the Southern Presbyterians took opposite positions. Rather, Hodge said, "it is largely in both cases, because every man, and every body of men, are more or less subject to the controlling influence of public opinion, and of the life of the community to which they belong."[43]

Despite this nuanced awareness, Hodge himself could not maintain a complex account of causation when he turned to explaining great events like the termination of slavery. As he used providential categories, even Hodge, who ranked among the most perceptive American theologians, substituted a simple belief in God's immediate action for a complex belief in God's mediated control through secondary causes. But by so doing, Hodge let himself off the hook. With a simplistic trust in immediate divine causation, it was no longer necessary to sweat over what one should do, and one was no longer required to think hard about what was happening and why it happened.

As explained in the illuminating books by George Fredrickson and Anne Rose on Americans whom the war pushed in secular directions, we know that there were other American intellectuals, contemporaries of Charles Hodge, who were, in fact, inspired by the war to sweat over what they should do and to think hard about what caused events. But perhaps because these individuals were repelled by the simplistic way in which traditional believers invoked providence during the war, they appealed less and less to providence themselves.

The result in American intellectual life can be keyed to the stance of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln joined together trust in providence and much agnosticism about the work of God in the world. After Lincoln, American thinkers were increasingly divided between those who, on the one side, continued to trust in providence and who knew very well what God was doing in the world, and those, on the other, who gave up on providence and embraced agnosticism about the ultimate meaning of the world.

Regarded in traditional religious terms, it was certainly not unwise for American theologians (and ordinary believers as well) to trust in providence. Without such trust, it is hard to imagine that traditional Christianity could exist, or for that matter traditional Islam or most varieties of traditional Judaism. The difficulty was not trust in providence as such but trust in providence so narrowly defined by the republican, covenantal, commonsensical, Enlightenment, and – above all – nationalistic categories that Protestant evangelicals had so boldly appropriated with such galvanizing effects in the early decades of the nineteenth century. For that kind of providence, the war – with its clash of armies and ideologies, with its unprecedented moral, legal, governmental, and social complications, with its avalanche of death and destruction – should have posed insuperable difficulties. That kind of providence very much needed to be seen in light of what Abraham Lincoln finally concluded – in the apt summary of Phillip Paludan: "The war had become too complex, too astounding, for him to believe that mere argument made complete sense."[44]

Chapter 6

Opinions of Protestants Abroad

The opinions of non-Americans on religious aspects of the War between the States represent a minor theme in the more general question of how the Civil War was viewed from outside the country.[1] Yet even preliminary attention to the subject can aid us in understanding why the Civil War amounted to a theological crisis in the United States. Views from abroad were naturally shaped in their moral and religious evaluation of the American conflict by national, class, and denominational perspectives. In addition, up-to-date information about unfolding events and opinions in North America was harder to come by abroad in that era before successful deployment of the transatlantic cable, not to speak of air travel, radio, the Internet, and CNN. Yet, with those limitations duly recognized, it is still the case that foreign observers often saw what Americans could not see or, to put it more precisely, often saw certain things about singularities in the structure of American thought that were hard for Americans within that structure to comprehend.

In particular, concerned outside observers perceived with unusual clarity that American disputes over the Bible and slavery grew as much from broad interpretive assumptions brought to the text as from detailed exegesis of the Book. Some grasped a biblical distinction between slavery and race that only a few Americans were able to understand. Moreover, foreigners tended to be sharply conscious of how American economic practice and American political ideology influenced the shape of religious argument. Foreign Catholics were also alert to how traditions of Dissenting Protestantism bestowed a distinct coloration on American political developments. Outside observers, in short, testified to the deficiencies and advantages of viewing American developments from afar. Even if their opinions lacked the nuance afforded by extensive close observation, they illuminated the distinctive strengths and