The American Churches and the Civil War

MAURICE DOWLING

Irish Baptist College, Queen’s University

ABSTRACT. The essence of this paper is to show how religion, and especially Protestantism in its Evangelical vein, built the context for the outburst of the American Civil War. The issue of slavery is debated with reference to how the North and the South perceived the problem as well as the economic aspects involved. The author also presents how various Protestants (especially Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists) related themselves to the question of war and how they justified or rejected the idea of conflict over human freedom. The period following the war is also briefly tackled and particularly the idealization of the culture and religion of the South.

KEY WORDS: war, evangelicals, slavery, abolition, Bible

Introduction

The Civil War (1861-65) is “the central event of American history”. As well as being a traumatic conflict for the nation as a whole, it was also (and particularly) one for the Churches. Although it was not a “war of religion” in the traditional sense, it can nevertheless be described as a “religious war”. Indeed, James McPherson says that “historians have tended to overlook the degree to which it was a religious war”. It was not a war between different religions in the manner of the medieval “Crusades” or the French wars of religion, nor was it a war to determine the nature of the established Church and its constitu-

tional position, as was the English Civil War. Nevertheless, religion (which for the majority of church attenders in nineteenth-century America meant evangelical Protestantism) provided justification for the war; it shaped people’s reactions to military successes and failures; it became the foundation for understanding the war both during its course and afterwards. Mark Noll writes:

Christianity was everywhere present in the crisis leading to the American Civil War and in the War itself. As during the American Revolution, faith as such was not a cause of the conflict, but it did provide a network of influences which intensified the political, social and cultural differences that brought on the strife. As intense as the religious commitment to the War was, so wide-reaching were the religious effects it precipitated.

We should also note Noll’s comment that “the Civil War... was a much more actively religious struggle than the earlier War for Independence”. Similarly Robert Handy:

[The Civil War] was in many important respects a war between evangelicals, north and south. Conspicuous leaders and interpreters of the combat on both sides were products of Anglo-American Protestantism, and freely cited its concepts and sanctions on behalf of the Union or the Confederacy. As the crisis unfolded, the pulpit and the church Press hastened to interpret the dramatic events... With a few exceptions, the evangelical leaders of the warring sections interpreted the cause to which they were committed as holy and righteous.

3 Of course, religion was not the only factor in these and other such wars.
6 A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 265f. These remarks should not be taken to mean that only evangelicals were involved. Jews and Catholics, for example, were
and Richard Carwardine:

Although the Civil War had to do with the defense of vested material interests, we may reasonably doubt whether concern over economic interests could of itself have launched that conflict. What engaged the passions of both sections was the moral meaning men and women gave to being “southern” and “northern” and to the systems of free and slave labor each had developed. Evangelicalism, more than any other element, provided the core of these divergent moral perceptions of the appropriate social and economic direction of the Union.7

All this is unsurprising, given the extent to which Christianity had permeated all sections of American life and society. From the very beginning of her life as an independent nation, and indeed long before Independence, Christian symbols and language had shaped America’s perception of herself and given her a sense of “manifest destiny”.8 In 1630 John Winthrop, first governor of Massachusetts Bay, stressed the importance of the

also caught up in the conflict, as were people with little or no religious allegiance.
8 According to Hugh Brogan and many others, “manifest destiny” was a phrase first used by the journalist John L. O’Sullivan, who in 1845 proclaimed that it was America’s “manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions”. See H. Brogan, Longman History of the United States of America (London: Longman, 1985), 305. However, Linda Hudson claims that the expression was first used by Jane Cazneau (1807-78), a journalist and writer well known (or even “notorious”) in nineteenth-century America. See Linda S. Hudson, Manifest Destiny. A Biography of Jane McManus Storm Cazneau (Texas, 2001). Regardless of who first coined the phrase, the attitude existed well before 1845, and it was to affect America’s perception of herself not only as regards the geographical continent but in the world as a whole; see Sydney Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 638, 849-850, 877-8.
“covenant” which the colonists were making with God and he made his famous comment about New England being “a city upon a hill”. The kind of messianism seen in sixteenth- and particularly seventeenth-century England was transferred to the New World, which the immigrants and settlers saw as a Promised Land; they were a people blessed by God and given a unique role in the world. In 1702 Cotton Mather published his Magnalia Christi Americana: or, The Ecclesiastical History of New England, which is a collection of accounts of the Lord’s “great works” in the foundation of the Colonies. Handy quotes Matthew Simpson, a northern Methodist Bishop, as saying (during the Civil War) that “God cannot do without America”.10 Examples could be multiplied of such “elect nation” thinking. From the beginning the United States did not have a national or established Church in the British sense; nevertheless, Americans readily applied Biblical and Christian categories to their understanding of their life and history as a nation. Nathan Hatch comments that “the most powerful popular movements in the early republic were expressly religious.”11 Although the major framers of the Constitution held to a deist rather than an evangelical version of Protestantism, religious discourse about the new nation readily became evangelical discourse in a context shaped by the growing strength of evangelicalism in the

10 Handy, 266. According to Ahlstrom, Matthew Simpson interpreted the American acquisition of California and the discovery of gold there as a sure sign of God’s special role for the United states (A Religious History of the American People, 46).
11 Nathan O. Hatch, The Democratization of American Christianity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 224. One could say that the ultimate version of this “elect nation” thinking was Mormonism, which arose in the 1820s. Here it was not a matter simply of Biblical concepts being applied to America; rather, the Bible is superseded by a superior revelation in which America is the Promised Land where God worked his original work and his Son imparted his most important teachings.
The problem was that, in the course of these decades, “the driving engines of democracy and evangelical religion were creating not a single Christian America but Northern and Southern versions of the godly republic”.13

An intensity of religious spirit and commitment is to be seen in the remarkable growth of American evangelicalism between the Revolution and the Civil War, in the “revivalism” which was such a prominent feature of early nineteenth-century America, and also in the more traditional and conventional forms of Christianity, whether Protestant or Catholic. This religious intensity is indicated also by the colossal number of Bibles printed and distributed. “Even more than in the eighteenth century, if any book touched the lives of [nineteenth-century] Americans, it was a Bible... Bible language and stories dominated the world of American print.”14

European Enlightenment thought had certainly crossed the Atlantic, but it did not seriously weaken the influence of the Churches or of the Christian tradition. Rather, with its emphasis on the power of reason the Enlightenment served to stimulate American self-confidence, and with its emphasis on the rights of man it served to stimulate the concern for philanthropy which was inherent in the Christian message, although not always made explicit. The post-Independence period saw a vast amount of activity directed towards alleviating the conditions of the poor, the physically and mentally ill, those in prison, widows, orphans and immigrants. There were campaigns to provide better education for all and there were also moves towards securing equal rights for women. However, there was one humanitarian issue that caused a deep divide

12 Evangelical Protestantism has been defined as “the principal subculture in antebellum America” (Richard Carwardine, Religion and Politics in Antebellum America, xv; cf. 1, 44).
13 Noll, America’s God, 194.
among Christians, and that issue, slavery, would eventually lead the nation to civil war.

Pre-War Tensions
It should not be thought that, for all Northerners, slavery was an evil which had to be abolished even at the cost of civil war. Probably only a small minority thought in such terms. What disturbed many was the prospect of the expansion of slavery into territories which had yet to be incorporated into the United States. At the beginning of the war, many in the North believed that the South’s great sin was secession rather than slavery. Northerners regarded secession as rebellion against the “powers-that-be”, in other words against the lawful government ordained by God. Biblical rhetoric was often used to justify war to eradicate the sin of rebellion rather than the sin of slavery. As the war progressed, the two issues came to be identified more and more. Many Northerners came to the view that, in a sense, slavery had made war on the United States Constitution, and therefore it deserved to be abolished and the slaves should be emancipated.

There can be no doubt that the issue of slavery generated very deep and powerful emotions—either for or against “the South’s peculiar institution”. Many Americans felt that the humanitarian and Christian principles which stimulated concern for the underprivileged, and led to the formation of many charitable enterprises and institutions, should be extended to the millions of black people who lived in a state of slavery.15 It was

15 According to Ahlstrom, by 1860 there were at least 3.5 million slaves in the United States (A Religious History of the American People, 655). Brogan (see page 395) quotes a figure of 31 million for the total US population in 1860. The same statistics are given by J. B. Stewart in The Oxford Companion to United States History, ed. Paul S. Boyer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 130. Stewart points out that, when war broke out, the North’s population dwarfed the South’s by a ratio of more than two to one—22 million to 9 million (of whom 3.5 million were slaves and were therefore not enlisted in the Confederate armies). J. P. Reidy points out that “between 1790 and 1860
of course possible (and common) for white people to believe in the superiority of the white races over the black while also believing that it was morally wrong for one man to “own” another.\textsuperscript{16} God may have given to certain races special gifts, privileges and responsibilities, but in another sense all men were equal in the sight of God. All men were created in the image of God and therefore slavery, which reduces enslaved people to the level of animals or goods, was an affront to God himself. Furthermore, the principles expressed as, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”, and, “Love your neighbour as yourself”, made it self-evident that slavery was wrong. No free man in all honesty would ever want to be a slave himself, so what right had he to maintain others in a state of slavery? Abolitionists also felt that the owning of other human beings had a corrupting influence on the owners themselves—power corrupts and it leads to the desire for more and more power: the slave-owners, so the abolitionists claimed, wanted not only to exercise tyranny over their black labourers but also to extend the slave-owning principle throughout the United States. The abolitionists’ arguments were based not only on Christian principles (as they saw them) but also on the example of Great Britain. Largely as a result of evangelical pressure, the British Parliament made the slave trade illegal in 1807, and slavery itself was abolished in the British West Indies in 1834.\textsuperscript{17}

the slave population had grown from approximately 7 million to nearly 4 million” (ibid., 717). This growth was seen by many Southerners as a sign of divine blessing.

\textsuperscript{16} For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-96), whose \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} did so much to fuel evangelical feeling against slavery (see below), has been described as “hostile to the slave-owners but profoundly racist in her assumptions” (Parish, 50).

\textsuperscript{17} In America one of the most powerful statements of evangelical anti-slavery feeling was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, which appeared first in serial form in a magazine in 1851, was first published as a book in 1852 and immediately became a bestseller. As well as attacking slavery in general the work particularly targeted the Fugitive Slave Acts which
However, other Americans—particularly, but by no means exclusively, in the South—also held deep Christian convictions but took a completely different view. Unlike the abolitionists, the defenders of slavery could appeal to the “literal” meaning of Scripture. The Bible, they said, nowhere condemned slavery;\(^{18}\) indeed, it was part of Ancient Israelite society\(^ {19}\) and it was part of the world order which both Jesus and also the New Testament writers, notably Paul, accepted.\(^ {20}\) Southern slave-
holders saw themselves as versions of the ancient Israelite patriarchs, benevolently and paternalistically presiding over a rural idyll, at the head of an extended family consisting of children, grandchildren, “bondmen” and “bondmaids”. In the New Testament slaves were exhorted to be obedient to their masters, and masters were urged to treat slaves humanely (Paul’s *Letter to Philemon* was a *locus classicus* for the pro-slavery position).

Slavery was part of the God-ordained order of human society (although some Christians defending slavery were at least prepared to see it as being in the same category as poverty, disease, illness or death; namely, ordained or permitted by God even if not particularly desirable from a human perspective!). Because abolitionists were often people known (or believed) to hold “liberal” or “freethinking” religious opinions, defenders of slavery used the tactic of claiming that attacks on slavery were in fact also attacks on the authority of the Bible—a very serious matter in nineteenth-century America. Pro-slavery Christians argued that masters were of course expected to treat their slaves kindly, in accordance with Christian principles. As defenders of the *status quo* they argued that the so-called evils of slavery were not the fault of the institution itself; they were caused by slave-owners who failed in their responsibilities and abused their slaves. Similarly, they said, in human society gen-

dress to the South Carolina legislature in 1822 Richard Furman, pastor of the First Baptist Church, Charleston SC, and one of the most distinguished Baptists in the USA, enunciated the popular “Biblical” defense of slavery. “The right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example.” “Had the holding of slaves been a moral evil, it cannot be supposed that the inspired Apostles, who feared not the faces of men, and were ready to lay down their lives in the cause of their God, would have tolerated it for a moment in the Christian Church.” “In proving this subject justifiable by Scriptural authority, its morality is also provided; for the Divine Law never sanctions immoral actions.” See the quotations in Bill Leonard, *Baptist Ways* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), 186. In his influential *Exposition of the Views of the Baptists* (1823) Furman sought to overcome qualms about slavery among the faithful and called upon slave-owners to regard their slaves as a sacred trust to whom they owed kindness and care.

*PERICHORESIS* 7.1 (2009)
erally there were many cases of children being ill-treated by their parents, or wives by their husbands, but that did not mean that marriage, parenthood and family life were wrong in themselves. When abolitionists quoted the “Golden Rule” (“Do unto others…”) and also the exhortation, “Love your neighbour…”, the pro-slavery camp replied that slaves should of course be treated in accordance with these principles; the principles were no proof that slavery should be abolished.

But if the pro-slavery lobby felt that slavery was Biblically justified, how did they justify the enslavement exclusively of black people, the fact that only black (“Afro-American”) people worked as slaves? Here they were on much less sure ground, because it was difficult to find explicit Biblical arguments in support of racial slavery. Some defenders of slavery cited Noah’s cursing of Ham (Canaan) in Genesis 9:25-27 and claimed that the black man’s subservience was the result of God’s judgment upon the (alleged) ancestor of the black races, but this was really a case of reading the Genesis passage through a prism which Mark Noll describes as a “deeply entrenched intuitive racism”. Noll also makes the interesting comment:

Belief that the Curse of Canaan from Genesis 9:25ff applied to blacks in mid-nineteenth-century America still flourished among the people at large, but was largely passé among intellectual elites.

21 It is impossible to find any exegetical or historical justification for such a deduction. The issue is discussed in detail in Stephen R. Haynes, Noah’s Curse. The Biblical Justification of American Slavery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). One of the difficult points in the Biblical story is the fact that, although Ham was the offender, it was actually his son Canaan who was cursed by Noah.


23 “The Bible and Slavery”, 62. See also Noll’s comments in America’s God, 418.
More important than any particular text was “the widespread and deeply engrained conviction that among the peoples of the earth only Africans were uniquely set apart for chattel bondage”. Pro-slavery advocates in effect unconsciously blended together two factors: (1) the (apparent) Biblical arguments in support of slavery, and (2) their own commonsense intuitions (or “gut feeling”) that the black races were inferior to the white. By the providence of God, they believed, the institution of slavery, if properly and humanely maintained, served to benefit the black races—as slaves black people enjoyed a protection and a security that they could not have in a state of freedom, because of their natural inferiority and therefore inability to cope with the world as efficiently as the white man could. God had ordained that the black races should be the slaves of the white and he had given the white man a stewardship over the black. Again, it should be noted that critics of slavery were also prone to this kind of racism. It was possible to argue for an ending of slavery and also to believe that black people “could not, consistently with the public welfare, be entrusted with the exercise of political power”.

In addition to the “Biblical” arguments, slave-owners were also quick to point out what they saw as their critics’ hypocrisy. Abolition was a popular cause in the North, where industry, mining and big business were blossoming in the early nineteenth century. The slave-owners pointed out that the industrial

25 In 1859 the Southern Baptist theologian John Leadley Dagg published his *Elements of Moral Science*, in which he defended slavery as an institution condoned and not condemned in Scripture. Dagg also argued that, while slavery had given rise to much evil, God had nevertheless used it to prosper the Africans. See T. George & D. S. Dockery (eds), *Baptist Theologians* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 180f. Dagg’s *Manual of Theology* (1857), which also included a “Biblical” defence of slavery, became the first textbook in Systematic Theology to be used in Baptist seminaries in the South.
26 So said the distinguished Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge, quoted in Noll, *America’s God*, 419.
“wage slaves” of the North lived in far worse conditions than the black slaves on Southern plantations. When the abolitionists argued that an industrial worker or miner was nevertheless a free man and could move from one place to another, the slave-owners replied that such “freedom” was an illusion; being a wage slave in Boston was no better than being one in New York! The pro-slavery lobby also appealed to the antiquity and ubiquity of slavery in human history from its beginnings; slave societies everywhere had proved to be more stable than “free labour” ones.

The problem with slavery was not only that it generated intense passions. It also divided the country geographically. Slavery was “the South’s peculiar institution” and the Southern economy depended on it. A study by two American scholars comments:

The greater part of the South took shape as a slave society, not merely a society that permitted slavery. For southern slaveholders and nonslaveholders alike, slavery left no feature of life untouched. The American South ranks with ancient Greece and Rome among the few genuine slave societies in world history—that is, societies in which slave labor provided the basis of the social structure, the economy, and the culture. Slaves constituted about one third of the population of the South.27

As the United States expanded, and new States were formed (especially in the central and western regions), the question of the extension of slavery to new areas of population was a particularly thorny one. The “Missouri Compromise” of 1820-21 ruled that Missouri would be admitted to the Union as a “slave state” but that slavery would be prohibited elsewhere in territories north of latitude 36°30’ (Missouri’s southern border). The drawing of precise geographical lines between slave and non-

slave areas led to further tensions and divisions, the most famous of which was the Dred Scott case which was decided in 1857. Dred Scott, a slave, had in the 1830s spent some time in Illinois, a non-slave State, and elsewhere in territory where slavery was forbidden. Years later he sued his new owners for his freedom in the Missouri courts (i.e. in a slave State), on the grounds that the time spent in non-slave areas gave him the right to be free. The United States Supreme Court, under Chief Justice Roger B. Taney who was uncompromisingly pro-slavery, ruled in 1857 that Scott, being a slave and a black man, was not a United States citizen and was not entitled to appeal to the courts. Furthermore, his status should be decided by the State where he was living when the case was processed, i.e. Missouri. In the highly tense political atmosphere of the 1850s the Dred Scott decision immediately deepened divisions over slavery, not least because it declared the Missouri Compromise to be unconstitutional.28

The fact of a clear-cut North-South divide, the emergence of two distinct societies and cultures, naturally stimulated the secessionist cause in the Southern States. To many Southerners it became increasingly obvious that secession, i.e. withdrawal from the Union and the establishment of an independent nation, was the only way to protect their economy and to guaran-

28 Another “Compromise”—of 1850 (it actually became law in September of that year)—had attempted to resolve some of the problems arising from the slavery issue by providing for the admission of California as a free (non-slave) state, the abolition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and the organization of the New Mexico and Utah territories without any reference to slavery. Southerners naturally saw these measures as a further undermining of the institution of slavery in preparation for an eventual total abolition throughout the nation. The tense atmosphere was stimulated also by the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. This act declared that in these territories a decision on slavery would depend on the holding of a referendum. Tensions led to violence between pro- and anti-slavery factions. Kansas was admitted as a free State in 1861, when the Civil War had already begun, and Nebraska in 1867, by which time the war was over and slavery was illegal anywhere in the United States.
tee their distinctive “plantation” way of life and its values. The threat of war was felt for many years before the conflict, but what finally precipitated it was the election in November 1860 of Abraham Lincoln as President. Lincoln was elected on an anti-slavery platform and did not receive a single Electoral College vote from the South. The Southern States decided that, rather than allowing their world to be destroyed by Lincoln’s policies, they would withdraw from the Union and set up an independent Confederacy. Lincoln would not accept such a withdrawal. He regarded the South’s decision as an act of rebellion and he went to war in order to prevent the dismembering of the Union. The question was, Lincoln said, “whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they choose”. For their part, Southerners did not see themselves as rebels but as men and women fighting for a just cause:

When Southerners, intent upon the defense of slavery and their constitutional rights, came to consider secession their only remaining option, they split into intellectually irreconcilable but politically reconcilable positions. The great majority believed a state had a right to secede, but, whereas some appealed to constitutionally sanctioned state rights, others appealed to the doctrine of resistance to tyranny as annunciated in their forefathers’ Declaration of Independence.

29 Strictly speaking, Lincoln at the time of his election had not committed himself to the total abolition of slavery but only to banning the establishment of the institution in new areas. However, Southerners interpreted a vote for Lincoln as a vote for abolition. Lincoln was the first President from the recently formed Republican Party (established in 1854). The Republicans drew a significant proportion of their support from Northern, anti-slavery evangelicals. Lincoln himself never became a member of any Church, but there is no reason to doubt that he had firm Christian convictions, often expressed in his speeches.
31 Elizabeth Fox-Genevese and Eugene D. Genovese, 614.
However they rationalised it, Southerners saw the conflict as a struggle for their freedom against a tyrannical rule imposed on them, a foreign rule which threatened to destroy their economy and indeed their whole way of life—a way of life which so obviously embodied the divine order for human society. It was natural to draw a comparison with what had happened in the 1770s and 1780s, a comparison which of course carried a good deal of weight in the United States. During the War of Independence (the “American Revolution”) the colonists fought for and won independence from British rule, and they regarded their victory as a sign of divine blessing. In the 1860s many Southerners claimed that they were fighting in a similar cause: like their forefathers they were engaged in a legitimate struggle for freedom. They were not rebelling against legally constituted authority and hence they could not be said to have transgressed the principle of Romans 13. Echoing the words of David in 1 Samuel 17:37, Jefferson Davis, who would soon become the President of the Confederate States, said in January 1861:

We but tread in the paths of our fathers when we proclaim our independence and take the hazard, not in hostility to others... but from the high and solemn motive of defending and protecting the

32 The contribution of religious discourse, particularly millenarian rhetoric, to the cause of Independence is discussed by Jonathan Clark, “The American Revolution: A War of Religion?”, History Today 39 (December 1989). Clark shows how opposition to the tyranny of the papal “Antichrist”—opposition which had been for generations such an important part of Puritanism in both Britain and America—quite readily evolved into the Colonists’ belief that opposition to British tyranny was also a godly cause. Desmond Bowen emphasizes the contribution of Ulster Protestant emigrants (mainly Presbyterians) to the revolutionary cause: “The conviction that their new-found liberty in both religious and political affairs was a gift of God increased greatly during the revolutionary war years, and there developed in popular American Protestantism belief in a kind of secular version of ‘election’.” See D. Bowen, History and the Shaping of Irish Protestantism (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 473.
rights we inherited, and which it is our duty to transmit unshorn to our children... We will invoke the God of our fathers, who delivered them from the power of the lion [i.e. Britain in the 1770s], to protect us from the ravages of the bear [i.e. the Federal government in the 1860s]; and thus, putting our trust in God and in our own firm hearts and strong arms, we will vindicate the right as best we may.33

Some Southern Christians argued that in its Constitution the Confederacy should commit itself specifically to the cause of Christ; in other words, that the Confederacy should be officially proclaimed a “Christian society”. Others, however, felt that this would undermine the fundamental principle of separation of Church and State.

As the discussion so far has indicated, the emerging North-South conflict involved many appeals to, and conflicting interpretations of, the Bible. Mark Noll emphasizes “the immense, and immensely complicated, role of biblical authority in creating the two Christian nationalisms that in 1861 fell on each other with a holy vengeance”.34 America, especially in the period between the Revolution and the Civil War, was very much a Bible-reading and Bible-believing nation. Unfortunately, Christians in both North and South read the Bible with a hermeneutic shaped by their particular culture, and they therefore came to very different conclusions about the Bible’s teaching on such issues as slavery, freedom and nationhood. In another work Noll comments:

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

34 Noll, America’s God, 371.
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.35

Conflicts within the Churches
Concerning slavery Sydney Ahlstrom says: “Few subjects, if any, are so fundamental to American religious history”.36 The Civil War of the 1860s was preceded by a series of “civil wars” within the main Churches over this issue. Indeed, the influence of religion in America was such that the divisions within the various denominations contributed greatly to the polarisation of views and attitudes in the nation as a whole. Ahlstrom stresses the role of the Churches in the hardening of attitudes which preceded the War: “They provided the traditional recourse and appeal to the Absolute. They gave moral grandeur to the antislavery cause and divine justification for slavery”.37 Similarly Steven Woodworth writes:

The rending of the nation’s three largest religious denominations along North-South lines was a first harbinger that the issues dividing Americans were becoming more important than those that bound them together.38

Likewise Charles Reagan Wilson:

35 Mark Noll, The Civil War as a Theological Crisis (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 8. Noll also says: “The country had a problem because its most trusted religious authority, the Bible, was sounding an uncertain note” (page 50). Later he sardonically comments: “As things worked out, military coercion determined that, at least for the purposes of American public policy, the Bible did not support slavery” (page 160).
36 Ahlstrom, 649.
37 Ahlstrom, 668.
The church schisms unleashed angers, fears, and even violence, which further divided the nation’s religious people and set the tone for eventual political division.\textsuperscript{39}

\textit{Presbyterians}

American Presbyterianism had long been troubled by divisions between “Old School” and “New School”. The Old School emphasized the Church’s traditional polity and took very seriously the Reformed principle that matters of Church order were part of divine law (\textit{jus divinum}). They were opposed to anything which they saw as a loosening of Church structures, and hence, for example, they were suspicious of the “Great Awakening” of the eighteenth century and also of the revivalism which was so prominent in the years after 1800. They were concerned too for the preservation of sound doctrine and they were quick to condemn any deviation from the standards of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. After 1800 the influence of Congregationalism began to create within Presbyterianism a “New School”. This was at first a rather unorganized movement which valued the work of the interdenominational societies. “New School” men were prepared to work with believers from other Churches and they saw the value of such joint efforts in areas of the country, for example on the Frontier, where Christian influence was lacking. Furthermore, they wanted “a religious faith more obviously consonant with the Enlightenment ideals that had been woven into the nation’s democratic faith”\textsuperscript{40}, and hence they moved away from traditional Calvinism. In 1837-8 a split occurred which, Ahlstrom says, “can probably be regarded as the first great ecclesiastical South-North separation”\textsuperscript{41}, although the break did not constitute a neat North-South division. The split was not primarily over the

\textsuperscript{39} “Religion and the American Civil War in Comparative Perspective”, in \textit{Religion and the American Civil War}, ed. R. M. Miller, H. S. Stout, C. R. Wilson, 395.

\textsuperscript{40} Ahlstrom, 466.

\textsuperscript{41} Ahlstrom, 660.
issue of slavery, but to a certain extent the conflict over slavery did contribute to divisions within Presbyterianism. The Old School had a large and influential following in the South, where it had about a third of its membership, whereas the New School had a very small Southern constituency and its main numerical strength was in Northern “abolitionist” areas. Furthermore, the cause of abolition was a natural companion to the New School’s inclination towards Enlightenment ideals. In 1850 the New School General Assembly formally rejected the view that slavery was a divinely sanctioned institution, but it was not until 1857 that the few New School presbyteries in the South withdrew to form a separate body.

In 1861 the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (commonly known as the “Southern Presbyterian Church”) came into being. After the war it was reconstituted as the “Presbyterian Church in the United States” (PCUS), when it was joined by a number of congregations which had existed outside the main Southern body. The Northern Presbyterians mostly belonged to what was officially known as the “Presbyterian Church in the United States of America” (PCUSA). The reunion of these two main bodies was only achieved in the 1980s.

Methodists
Methodists were “the most numerous religious movement in America from the Revolution to the Civil War.” John Wesley had never devoted much actual time to the anti-slavery cause, or indeed to any other social campaign. He expressed his opposition to slavery in his Thoughts on Slavery of 1774 and in his famous extant last letter, written in February 1791 (a few days before his death), in which he encouraged William Wilberforce in his mission to end the slave trade, “the vilest under the sun.”

42 Mark Noll, America’s God, 5. See also the discussion of the remarkable expansion of American Methodism on 168ff.
However, while many Methodists agreed with Wesley, within American Methodism there was also a large number of slave-owners, and indeed slave-owning ministers. In essence American Methodists for a long time agreed to differ: “The [Methodist] church’s unity depended on the strict enforcement of silence or neutrality on the slavery question, and for half a century this proved to be possible”.44 The issue remained a matter of local option. However, during the 1840s the divisions became splits. At first the anti-slavery Methodists began to form separate bodies, organizing the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Michigan (1841) and the Wesleyan Methodist Connection in New York (1842-43). Within the parent body, the Methodist Episcopal Church, tensions were brought to a head in 1844-45, when the Southern churches separated to form the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

Baptists
Baptists did not have the kind of centralized structures seen in Presbyterianism and Methodism, and so the concept of a “split” means something rather different in a Baptist context. The chief national agency was really the General Convention for Foreign Missions, founded in 1814 to support the work of Adoniram Judson and other missionaries.45 For a long time the missions board avoided the slavery issue. However, there were tensions among Baptists just as there were in other denominations. In 1840 abolitionists formed the American Baptist Antislavery Convention, and, as an expression of the opposite view, in 1845 the Southern Baptist Convention came into being.

The Southern Baptist Convention was thus a direct product of tensions over the slavery issue in the antebellum period. Sydney Ahlstrom writes:

44 Ahlstrom, 661.
45 It was also known as the Triennial Convention, because of its practice of holding national meetings every three years.
The Southern Convention was a new departure for American Baptists. It was frankly denominational in spirit and scope, designed by men who did not hesitate to speak of the Baptist “Church” (in the singular). It could undertake multiple tasks and organize appropriate boards as it saw fit. In this very important sense it objectified what had long been latent in the Southern Baptist tradition—what its historians have referred to as a “centralizing ecclesiology”. But one cannot discount the long-term basis for hierarchical and authoritarian modes of social organization which were engendered both by slavery and by the major intellectual defenses of it.46

The Southern Baptist identity became, like slavery, an integral part of the Southern culture. Leonard quotes Martin Marty’s comment that the Convention became “the Catholic Church of the South”,47 and Nancy Ammerman says that it became “the establishment faith of the South”.48 The quintessential Southerner was Baptist (or at least Protestant), white and pro-slavery.

Other Bodies
There were of course many other Christian denominations in the United States, the most important being the Lutheran, the Episcopal, and the Roman Catholic Churches. While there were within these Churches differences of opinion over slavery and the war, such differences did not result in splits. Lutheranism lacked an overall national body, and each territorial or ethnic

47 Bebbington, 316.
48 ibid., 340. Ammerman suggests that, in becoming the “establishment”, Southern Baptists were inclined to forget their Baptist heritage. They tended to show towards those who did not “conform” the same kind of intolerance which Baptists had suffered, and against which they had protested, throughout their history as a Baptist movement.
synod tended to come to terms with controversial issues in its own way. The leadership of the Episcopal and the Roman Catholic Churches adopted a generally passive approach and avoided taking any official position for or against slavery. Individual dioceses adapted themselves to local conditions. Members of these Churches, including the clergy, were of course involved in the conflict in various ways. One of the Episcopal Church’s Southern bishops, Leonidas Polk, became a general in the Confederate Army. Father Abram Ryan was a young Catholic priest who served the Confederacy as a chaplain and after the war edited a fiercely pro-Southern newspaper, Banner of the South. Randall Miller gives a figure of “roughly 145,000 Irish Catholics” serving in the Northern army, while many fought and died for the South.

**Christians during the Conflict**

“The conviction that God was on one’s own side provided the certainty that drove northerners and southerners apart”. It also strengthened their resolve to fight. Sydney Ahlstrom has an interesting comment on the effects of the conviction, common to men on both sides, that they were involved in a divinely-sanctioned crusade:

More cynical commanders and more despairing men might have been less sure that the Almighty was with them and that victory must surely come. They might have felt a stronger impulse to compromise. Perhaps piety lengthened the war.

Nothing sums up Northern evangelical sentiment over the war better than Julia Ward Howe’s poem (which evolved into the

---

52 Ahlstrom, 677.
“Battle Hymn of the Republic”), written just after she had visited a Union Army camp during the war’s early stages. (Howe was in fact a Unitarian, but this is not particularly evident in her famous hymn.) A sense of the unfolding of a divine drama, and not just a human one, is evident in the first lines and the refrain:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.
Glory, glory, Hallelujah!…  53

The war was seen almost as an extension of the saving work of Christ (who was portrayed as the soldiers’ model):

As He died to make men holy, let us die54 to make men free!

Similar sentiments were expressed by those fighting for the Confederacy. During the decades preceding the Civil War, “the world of southern evangelicals converged with that of southern masters… Primed by decades of proving themselves men of honor in recognizably southern ways, Baptists and Methodists rose readily to defend slavery in the 1830s, secession in the 1850s, and the holy cause of upholding both with force of arms in 1861”.55 The same can be said of the more “socially acceptable” denominations, namely, the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians. Southerners generally believed themselves to be citi-

53 Howe appears to have originally written a poem which was made into a hymn by the use of the tune of “John Brown’s body” and the addition of the chorus, “Glory, glory…”.  
54 Some versions read, “let us live…”, which was more appropriate once the war was over!  

PERICHORESIS 7.1 (2009)
zens of a godly nation, an “Israel”—in contrast to the godless, heathen North—and they were convinced that God would not abandon them.\textsuperscript{56} They were, after all, fighting to preserve the divinely ordained pattern of human society in which the descendants of Ham served the descendants of his brothers, a pattern in which the white races fulfil their God-given task of civilizing and protecting the black. The Confederate victories in the campaigns of 1861-62 were seen as evident tokens of divine blessing. In 1863, while victory for the South was still a possibility, a Southern Baptist Convention resolution acknowledged “the hand of God in the preservation of our victories with which he has crowned our arms”.\textsuperscript{57}

Leonidas Polk, the Episcopal Church’s Bishop of Louisiana, saw nothing incongruous in taking up arms for the Southern cause, and he became one of the South’s most distinguished army commanders.\textsuperscript{58} Polk was killed in action during the war’s final year. Commenting on Polk, Shelby Foote writes: “Northerners might express outrage that a man of the cloth... should take up the sword of rebellion; Southerners took his action as strong evidence that the Lord was on their side, and they on His”.\textsuperscript{59} Another Southern Churchman, Stephen Elliott, declared: “We are fighting to drive away from our sanctuaries the

\textsuperscript{56} It is interesting that the Articles of Secession were drafted on the communion table of the First Baptist Church in Columbia, SC, to which the secession convention had moved for want of a space large enough to accommodate the “Rebels”.


\textsuperscript{58} Sarah Dorsey, a wealthy Louisiana plantation mistress, presented Polk with a battle flag which depicted the Labarum, the Cross of Constantine. She also wrote in a letter to Polk: “We are fighting the Battle of the Cross against the Modern Barbarians who would rob a Christian people of Country, Liberty, and Life”. See Religion and the American Civil War, ed. R. M. Miller, H. S. Stout, C. R. Wilson, 103.

\textsuperscript{59} The American Civil War—A Narrative, volume 3 (London: Bodley Head, 1991), 357. Polk was the subject of a biography (indeed hagiography!) written by his son, William M. Polk, published in 1893.
infidel and rationalistic principles which are sweeping over the land and substituting a gospel of the stars and stripes for the gospel of Jesus Christ”. 60 Other prominent Southern Christians included General Thomas J. (“Stonewall”) Jackson and the man who was to assume overall command of the Army of Northern Virginia, General Robert E. Lee.61

In the early stages of the war Southern Christians had no difficulty in ascribing their armies’ victories to the hand of God. Matters became more difficult when the war started to go badly for the Confederacy. What was to be seen as one of the South’s greatest calamities occurred in May 1863, when Stonewall Jackson died of his wounds. His death was felt as a major blow, and Southern Christians interpreted it as divine judgment, not on Jackson himself but on the sins of the South—not least their sin in idolizing Jackson and “trusting in man rather than God”.62 The series of reverses which beset Southern arms from mid-1863 onwards was interpreted as a time of testing for the South, a time when God was purifying his people and challenging them to mend their ways. Confidence that God would eventually vindicate his people (or at least strident expressions of such confidence) lasted almost to the very end of the conflict.

60 Quoted in Handy, A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada, 266
61 Their stories are told in R. L. Dabney, Life and Campaigns of General T. J. Jackson; and J. W. Jones, Life and Letters of General Robert E. Lee. Both books are written as Christian biographies and emphasize their subjects’ spiritual lives. A little-known figure at the time of the war itself, Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843-1921) served in the Tennessee infantry and later in life became famous as a preacher, writer, and advocate of dispensational premillennialism.
62 What was particularly tragic from the Southern point of view was that Jackson died of wounds inflicted accidentally by his own men, and this happened just after a major Southern victory at the battle of Chancellorsville. Southern Christians felt that God was clearly saying something to them through both the manner and the timing of Jackson’s death. Southerners likened Jackson to Oliver Cromwell and saw their army as the rightful heir to Cromwell’s Bible-reading army.
In addition to “holy war” rhetoric there was a good deal of religious activity during the conflict. The Churches organized chaplaincy work, in which chaplains did much more than preach to the soldiers. For example, they often ministered to the sick and the wounded. The Churches also arranged collections to provide for the material needs of the fighting men and of their families. In the North particular attention was given to the needs of the increasing numbers of freed slaves.

A great deal of missionary and evangelistic activity was conducted in both armies. The young D. L. Moody and his wife were among those who served as missionaries (in their case, to the Union Army). After the war, Southern writers made much of the religious revivals which affected many soldiers in the Confederate Army, trying to make the point that the Southern soldier was much more inclined to godliness than his Northern counterpart. However, the evidence indicates that the two armies were affected by revivalism on more or less the same scale, although the Southern revivals became much more famous. Camp revival meetings, which had long been a part of the Frontier scene, were a major feature of army life. As well as the words of the preachers the threat of imminent death in battle contributed to many conversions, or at least professions of faith—what happened to some of these conversions once the fighting was over is another matter. The Churches also organized the distribution of large quantities of religious literature. Soldiers in both armies were given pocket New Testaments. Union soldiers had a copy printed by the American Bible Society and distributed by the New York Bible Society; Southern soldiers had one printed and distributed by the Confederate States Bible Society.63

63 “Bible smuggling” took place on a significant scale, as many copies were published in the North but distributed in the South, despite a ban on trade, and some were smuggled in from England into the South despite the Union blockade of Southern ports.
The Aftermath

The war was viewed in retrospect in the same kinds of religious categories as were evident before and during the conflict. Northerners felt that God’s cause had triumphed, although many of them also emphasized that God had allowed the North to undergo terrible trials in the war because the Northerners too were guilty of sin—they had, after all, been part of a nation which had tolerated slavery for so long. The assassination of President Lincoln at the end of the war was seen as another divine punishment on the entire nation, North and South. The distinguished theologian Horace Bushnell, a New England Congregationalist, stressed the necessity of seeing the war as an act of God’s judgment on the nation as a whole, a war in which the whole nation was purging itself of the corporate sin of slavery, and thus bringing about unity and reconciliation. “He dared to think that the war could be good in some way akin to the way in which Good Friday was good.”

Philip Schaff, the Church Historian, likewise “saw the possibility of a new and redeemed sense of nationhood rising out of the death and carnage. Reflecting his Hegelian heritage, however, he interpreted the war in a larger sense as having readied America for its great role in the cause of human freedom.”

“What freedmen [former slaves] experienced as a crossing of the Red Sea, their former masters experienced as the Babylonian captivity, replete with bitter tears and much gnashing of teeth.” Southerners continued to feel that their nation—a quasi-mystical body known as “the Southland”—was a godly and pious one and that the war had been caused by godless

---

64 Ahlstrom, 686. Bushnell (1802-76) was a pastor in Connecticut for twenty-five years until ill health forced him to retire in 1859. Well known as a theological writer, his view of Christ’s death as an example was particularly controversial.

65 ibid. Schaff (1819-93) was originally from Switzerland but spent many years teaching at the German Reformed Church’s seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, and later at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

66 Elizabeth Fox-Genevese and Eugene D. Genovese, 718.
men in the North, but some were in a state of confusion over why God had allowed the godless to triumph. John Bailey Adger, a leading representative of Southern Presbyterianism, argued in the *Southern Presbyterian Review* that Christians in the South were not wrong to believe “honestly and earnestly in the justice of the Southern cause”; rather, “the error of some was in allowing themselves to receive the popular idea... that God must surely bless the right”, while forgetting that God in his wisdom often permits suffering and sometimes allows “the righteous to be overthrown”. In sermons and religious periodicals the Book of Job, with its theme of the “righteous sufferer”, was pressed into service, as were Hebrews 12:6-7, which assured Southerners that the Lord chastens those whom he loves, and Romans 8:28, which assured them that all things would work together for good. While accepting the Confederate defeat as final, many comforted themselves with the thought that God would allow Confederate principles to succeed, perhaps in another form and another time. Inevitably many saw a parallel between the death of the Confederacy and the death of Christ—in both cases evil had apparently triumphed, but eventually God’s cause would be vindicated. The defeat was a form of discipline by God, a way of preparing the Southerners for a bright future. Some concluded that God had permitted the South’s defeat not because slavery was wrong but because Southerners had failed to evangelize the slaves adequately. Others emphasized a different type of sin. The high prices caused by wartime economic conditions in the South led to accusations of widespread speculation and extortion. One historian comments:

If the South was plagued by guilt during the war, and if we take Southerners’ own written testimony about its source and nature, it

---

67 Quoted in Noll, *America’s God*, 434. Adger (1810-99) had a long and distinguished career, serving for some twelve years as a missionary in Constantinople before being appointed to the faculty of Columbia Seminary in South Carolina. He edited the *Southern Presbyterian Review* from 1857 to 1885.
was not guilt over the sin of slavery but rather guilt for imagined economic sins.  

68

The South may have lost the war, and slavery may have been declared illegal throughout the united nation69, but the old slave-owning mentality persisted. Leonard writes:

In the search for ways to cope with defeat, Southern Baptists and other Southern Protestants looked to “the religion of the Lost Cause”—the idealization of the South’s culture and religion. Defeated politically, the South turned to the cultural superiority of its mythic past.70

Leonard quotes another authority, Charles Reagan Wilson, who writes that Protestant ministers

used the Lost Cause to warn Southerners of their decline from past virtue, to promote moral reform, to encourage conversion to Christianity, and to educate the young in Southern traditions; in the fullness of time, they related it to American values.71

Thus the military and political defeat of the Confederacy was, in Southern thinking, more than offset by its spiritual victory. The “Lost Cause” ideology stimulated—and was stimulated by—the belief that the Southern armies had been the “most Christian” armies ever seen in history.72 At Civil War reunions

68 Steven E. Woodworth, While God is Marching On. The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers, 274f.
69 In 1865 the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was passed, formally abolishing slavery.
70 Baptist Ways. A History, 204.
72 This belief was expressed in two highly influential works in particular: William W. Bennett, A Narrative of the Great Revival Which Prevailed in the Southern Armies (1876), and J. William Jones, Christ in the Camp; or, Religion in the Confederate Army (1887).
and commemorations in the South the Confederate dead were regularly honoured as “martyrs” who had given their lives in a righteous cause. Chief among these martyrs was Stonewall Jackson, who was seen as embodying all that was best in Southern Christian manhood.

The Ku Klux Klan was founded in Tennessee in December 1865, and in its official charge to new recruits, issued in 1867, it stated:

Our main and fundamental objective is the maintenance of the supremacy of the white race in this Republic. History and physiology teach us that we belong to a race which nature has endowed with an evident superiority over all other races, and that the Maker, in thus elevating us above the common standard of human creation, has intended to give us over inferior races a dominion from which no human laws can permanently derogate.⁷³

Although by no means all Southerners approved of the methods and the extremism of the “Klan”, most tended to accept that God intended the races to be segregated and that this applied to Church life as much as anything. The South after the war went its religious way, and the chief new ecclesiastical development of the postbellum era was the rise of independent Negro churches. The issue of slavery may have been relegated to the past, but American Christians, particularly in the South, were still having to grapple with the issue of white-black relationships. In the course of the century following the end of the Civil War we can see significant continuities between pro-slavery and pro-segregation arguments. Biblical texts once used

⁷³ Quoted in Hugh Brogan, Longman History of the United States of America, 356. The name of the “clan” contains a strange adaptation of the Greek word kuklos, “circle”. This violently racist (and anti-Republican) movement went into decline after a few years but was revived around 1916. One factor in its revival was the making of D. W. Griffith’s film, Birth of a Nation, in 1915. Based on Thomas Dixon’s 1905 novel, The Clansman, Griffith’s film presented an extremely pro-Southern and racist version of the Civil War and its aftermath, and an idealised image of the Ku Klux Klan.
in support of slavery were recycled as Biblical arguments in favour of racial segregation in both Church and society\textsuperscript{74} — and evangelicals continued to be divided.

\textsuperscript{74} Furthermore, additional “Biblical” arguments were developed by Christian segregationists. Texts which did not have any obvious reference to slavery could nevertheless be made to support segregation. Haynes quotes the example of Carey Daniel, a Baptist preacher who in the 1960s published a sermon entitled “God the Original Segregationist” and who argued that segregation was part of the divine order built into creation—in Genesis 1 we read that God made everything “after its own kind” (Noah’s Curse. The Biblical Justification of American Slavery, 86, 264). Other passages which have figured prominently in American (and South African) racial discourse are Deuteronomy 32:8 and Acts 17:26.