

Beecher Lectures 2005: Preaching Morality in America's Civil War

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By

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Dedicated to Harry Baker Adams

Lecture One: The American Jeremiad Divided Against Itself

I want to begin today by talking some about morality and religion in the Civil War as expressed through sermons and the writings of American clergy, North and South. This discussion, I hope, will set the stage for particular attention to battles and the homefront in the following two lectures. Throughout, the focus will be on sermons, as I'm sure Lyman Beecher would approve, and even more his son Henry Ward Beecher, who played such an influential role religiously and politically throughout the War.

First some context for those of you who are not—or not yet—Civil War buffs. The centrality of the Civil War to American history and American identity speaks for itself. Numbers count, and nowhere is this more true in American history than the Civil War. Directly, the war would claim one million military casualties, including 620,000 dead from battles, disease, and, most loathsome of all, prisoner of war camps. Indirectly, at least 50,000 civilians died from exposure to the War and 108,000 women were left widowed. These cumulative casualty counts, in a total population of only 30 million, almost equal losses from all other American wars combined. If translated into an equal proportion of the current U.S. population, the casualty rate would total 10 million

American soldiers and sailors, and countless civilians. Without exaggeration one can say that in terms of death the Civil War was America's most appalling act of human destruction.

The centrality of the War to American memory is equally profound. The Gettysburg Address stands as America's greatest national sermon and Lincoln's Second Inaugural serves as the nation's Sermon on the Mount. The number of books on the Civil War is simply staggering and testifies to the ongoing power of the War to shape a national identity. I'm told there are more books on Lincoln than anyone else except Jesus Christ. Gone With the Wind remains America's bestseller. In all there has been one book on the Civil War published every day since Appomattox. Reenactors stage mock battles religiously and range from amateur "farbs" to "hard core" realists marching barefoot to war [for a fabulous read on Civil War re-enactors I recommend Tony Horwitz's Confederates in the Attic]. Round table discussions are nation-wide events, even in areas never touched by the Civil War. PBS gained credibility and major numbers when a filmmaker named Ken Burns offered a riveting documentary of the war that continues to run to major audiences.

But in all of this preservation and celebration, there are some disturbing gaps in the literature. Remarkably, hardly anyone has explored the moral and religious dimensions of the conflict. Hard questions remain embedded in a coalition of silence. Themes of "emancipation," "liberty," and "a new birth of freedom" for the slaves ring loud and triumphant shouting America's greatness to the world. But the underlying question, "was it just?" remains mute. With the War's justness assumed, all that's left on the moral front is to celebrate the fact that the right side won.

But is the justness of the Civil War that simple? Historian Edward Ayers has recently worried about this—literally. In an essay entitled “Worrying About the Civil War,” Ayers argues: “It may be that we like the current story too much to challenge it very deeply and that we foreclose questions by repeating familiar formulas. The risk of our apparent consensus is that we paper over the complicated moral issues raised by a war that left hundreds of thousands of people dead. The risk is that we no longer worry about the Civil War.”

In the lectures to come we will worry about what most Americans—including scholars—celebrate. We will ask how did statesmen and generals conduct the war in terms of both armies against armies, and soldiers against civilians? And relatedly, how did ordinary northerners and southerners, in and out of the army, justify a level of killing that reached one million casualties? What, in other words, might a moral history of the Civil War look like?

In writing a moral history the historian does not presume to be a sort of Supreme Court justice adjudicating the past, trying actors for their crimes and then sentencing them. The dead no longer care, and they cannot be sentenced. Rather, it is for the living that the historian offers moral judgments in the hope that lessons for life today may ensue. Moral history imbues the present with a heightened sensitivity to what actors might have done, what they ought to have done, and what in fact, they actually did. It is in the distances between the ought and the actualities that moral judgments emerge. One bears witness to the past with all possible integrity and disinterestedness for the sake of the present and future.

Current debates over American wars in the 21st century dramatically confirm the contested nature of war among good people. The reason is simple: at its most elemental, war is evil. War is killing. War is destroying. It may be a necessary evil, and in that sense “right,” but it is nevertheless lethally destructive. So real world questions about war and morality will always strain any theory created to justify it, and invite debate. In these lectures, I pay particular attention to those aspects of the war that raise moral issues. Such issues appear on the home front and in the trenches, among foot soldiers and civilians no less than generals and statesmen

How then does this historian render moral judgments about a war? By holding up the actions against widely recognized, long established principles of just war. In asking how a just war should be fought, theorists isolate two primary principles: “proportionality,” and “discrimination.” The former requires that goals be proportional to the means employed. Grant that all soldiers at some level give up their right to life by enlisting in armed forces; even so, principles of proportionality still invoke limits to the carnage. If 20,000 Marines were annihilated in another raid on Fallujah many would judge that to be disproportional, and maybe even criminal. What about the Civil War where, for example, on one day at Antietam, 20,000 Americans were killed or wounded in suicidal frontal assaults? To this day Antietam stands as the bloodiest day in American history. But was it disproportional and therefore wrong? [Hint: there won’t be a single answer.]

The second category falls under the label of “discrimination,” and addresses the question of who should be considered legitimate targets in war. Non-combatants are deemed to stand outside the field of war proper; thus it is unjust to attack them. Just war

theory unanimously upholds the protection of civilians—no element of judgment or prudential “weighing” of costs and benefits, is acceptable in deciding whether or not to target civilians or take them hostage; it is always wrong.

Of course warfare sometimes unavoidably involves civilians who get caught up in the fighting. Today we use the term “collateral damage” to describe these tragic situations. Just war theorists address the topic of collateral damage in terms of “double effect.” The doctrine of double effect justifies killing civilians in war only if their deaths are not intended but accidental. So, for example, targeting an undefended city is not permissible but targeting a military establishment in the middle of a city is. The target is the military unit and not the civilians inadvertently caught up in the struggle.

Issues of proportionality of losses to strategic ends and discrimination of legitimate and illegitimate targets will recur in these lectures. While the theory remains clear in the abstract (i.e. without actual numbers in play), its application in the Civil War—the determination of right or wrong—is far from clear or unanimous, both from the vantage point of the participants and later observers. This becomes especially true in the later years of the war as it escalated from a limited war fought by armies in the field to a “total” war in which civilians and their property were deliberately targeted.

As the War escalated from a limited war into a total war in 1862, the moral justification changed in the North from a limited war for “Union” to a moral crusade for “freedom” and abolition. Unlike proportionality and discrimination in war, the destruction of slavery once and for all, is not morally ambiguous. At first a background topic as the (initially unacknowledged) cause of the war, slavery would grow ever more powerful in its foreground role throughout the war. With emancipation, it would

represent Lincoln's inner accelerator for mounting a total war on the Confederacy, soldier and civilian alike. And with abolition, it would provide an unambiguous moral triumph.

The justness of abolition and the freedom of four million dictates that any moral history of slavery unconditionally conclude that the right side won, no matter what the casualties and sacrifices. Lincoln was right when he said in his 2nd Inaugural in March 1864 that if God willed 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...so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.’”¹

But these lectures are not a moral history of slavery. They offer instead a moral history of a war, where questions of proportionality and discrimination continue to remain in play. In any moral history of slavery, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation would be unquestionably “right” and good. But in a moral history of the war, the Emancipation Proclamation becomes more problematic if it was employed by Lincoln and northern Republicans generally as a “lever” (Lincoln's term) for a total war on the Confederacy that deliberately targeted civilian farms, cities, and—in at least 50,000 instances—civilian lives.² In a moral history of the Civil War, it is not enough merely to say that the end of human bondage in the United States was worth a million white lives, true as that may be. The separate question of war remains: was it just? And here I will argue that the right side won *in spite of itself*. Instead of a just war dictated by prudent

¹ This point is powerfully argued in William Lee Miller, Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography (New York, 2002), 436-40.

² The figure of civilian casualties is taken from James M. McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era (New York, 1988), 619. The subject of civilian casualties is astoundingly understudied. Professor McPherson's estimate is the only estimate I have been able to locate.

considerations of proportionality and protection of non-combatants, I argue that in too many instances, both sides descended into moral misconduct.

OK, with this as background, it's time to start the war, and listen in on the clergy as they forged their cases for violent confrontation. On April 12, 1861, Jefferson Davis, president and commander and chief of the newly created Confederate States of America, ordered Confederate general Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard to reduce the fortress in Charleston Harbor as an unwanted "foreign" presence. The order was duly carried out and after a relatively brief artillery exchange in which no one was killed, the commander of Fort Sumter, Robert Anderson, surrendered.

With the firing on Fort Sumter, twenty years of accumulated frustration, occasional violence, and overheated rhetoric at last ignited a war whose outcome was unknown to everyone. Americans on both sides were not prepared morally for war any more than they were prepared politically or militarily. Throughout the early debates and saber rattling, few asked hard questions about the morality of war should it erupt. The word "war" was constantly on everyone's lips, either as a tragedy to be avoided or an adventure to be embraced. But few explored the moral meaning of war, or the "laws of war" with reference to a potential civil war.

By failing to address issues of just war before hostilities ensued, the stage was effectively set for Americans to ignore them after hostilities began. For such moral unpreparedness both sides would pay a horrific price.

With Sumter, patriotism triumphed with the Civil War. Before then, there were few symbols of national unification. Rather, state and local associations governed American life. In the early republic, the American flag, the clearest and most literal

emblem of patriotism was barely visible. Flags were limited largely to merchant and naval ships. None flew from homes or churches.³

Sumter would change this overnight. Flags began flying everywhere (Think back to the aftermath of 9-11 and every event since. A nation draped in flags is a nation at war). Overnight, the flag became the symbol of national unity and a vastly expanded federal (and Confederate) government.

Northern and Southern clergy no less than northern intellectuals fell victim to the sheer power of patriotism following Sumter. The capitulation of the clergy, North and South, to their nation states' political and military agenda would prove devastating. Ministers and religious writers were, after all, the most important moral authorities for fixing each section's redemptive mission and sacred claims with local connections in every community.⁴ North and South would enlist them for the task of the sacred legitimation necessary to mount a mutually "defensive" war that would be just in the eyes of God. Without that benediction, how could millions of primarily Protestant evangelical young men kill hundreds of thousands of their evangelical counterparts in good conscience?

How did the clergy accomplish their conversion to patriotism? In terms of national identity, the North had long adopted the Puritans' rhetoric of the American "New Israel" as its own. By 1861, American messianism became even more ingrained and as instinctual to elite opinion shapers as to ordinary men and women. The rituals of fast and thanksgiving days, begun in seventeenth-century New England, continued to serve as

³ See Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism (Princeton, 1999), 20-25.

⁴ See Philip Shaw Paluden, "A People's Contest: The Union and the Civil War 1861-1865" (New York, 1988), 339-74.

major occasions to preach righteousness and celebrate chosen peoplehood. They articulated what intellectual historian Perry Miller dubbed an “American Jeremiad” that spelled out America’s sacred identity as a “redeemer nation” engaged in a special “covenant” with God to save the world.⁵ However they saw the role of slavery in perverting the South, most northern moral arbiters in 1861 agreed that the ultimate goal of the war was the preservation of the Union.⁶ Because of the United States’ divine commission to be a redeemer nation, preserving the Union was a sufficient cause.

The Confederacy responded in kind to the northern jeremiad and its historical claims to providential chosenness. But the moral and spiritual creation of a national identity in the South would not be accomplished so readily as in the North. They had no rhetorical heritage that remained solely their invention. Instead, a new Confederate jeremiad would have to be invented, or more properly appropriated, from the “heretical” North. The Confederate capital of Richmond, unlike the Union capital, not only had to invent a nation with a constitution all its own, but also invest that new creation with the highest spiritual and moral legitimacy. And here I return to the same question I asked of northern, primarily Protestant soldiers. How else could avowedly Christian Confederate citizens be persuaded to kill and be killed?

The southern clergy's new burden of political preaching was made immensely easier by the new Confederate Constitution, adopted on February 8, and ratified March 11, 1861. Unlike its Federal counterpart, it explicitly declared its Christian identity, “invoking the favor and guidance of Almighty God.” The national motto, *Doe Vindice*

⁵ See Perry Miller, Errand Into the Wilderness; and Sacvan Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad

⁶ See, e.g. Horace Hovey, Freedom’s Banner (Coldwater, MI, 1861).

(“with God as our defender”) added additional weight to the South’s claim to be a uniquely Christian nation.⁷

Now was the time, President Davis proclaimed, to consecrate the new nation and “to recognize our dependence upon God . . . [and] supplicate his merciful protection.” This meant that the South was now in a position more analogous to ancient Israel’s theocratic constitution or to Puritan New England than to that of the North. The Constitution of the Union, after all, failed to invoke—or even mention—God.⁸

The Confederacy was going on record as a Christian nation in a unique covenant with God. Even as the North’s claim to political sovereignty was declared null and void, so also were its claims to a covenant with God annulled. The North’s Constitution, drafted as it was by “deists and atheists,” failed to invoke God’s name. Any northern claims to a special relationship were therefore spurious. In contrast, God smiled on a Confederacy happy to recognize Him and claim Him as her own.

When Confederate lawmakers introduced God explicitly into their national Constitution, they had no idea of the significance this act would later assume. It would not only solidify the South’s identity as a Christian republic, but it would also supply a surprisingly powerful critique of a “godless” northern Constitution. It would inspire *northern* Republican party campaigns to get God into their own Constitution and correct the oversight of the Founding Fathers. In the process it would set off a debate that

⁷ The national motto was formally introduced on the Confederacy’s seal in 1863. See Robert E. Bonner, Colors and Blood, 115-16.

⁸ Nineteenth-century churchmen were acutely aware of the absence of God in the federal Constitution and the implications of this for Christian nationhood. See Harry S. Stout, “Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution: The Case of the Federalist Clergy,” in Mark A. Noll, ed., Religion and Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s (New York, 1990), 62-76. Southern interpretations of the significance and meaning of the Constitution in the context of new nation-forming are described in E. Merton Coulter, The Confederate States of America 1861-1865 (Baton Rouge, 1950); and Emory M. Thomas, The Confederate Nation, 1861-1865 (New York, 1979).

continues to the present over the meaning of America. With separation of church and state, and in the culture of religious freedom, could America still be a “Christian nation”? For the South, and most Republicans in the North, the answer was an unequivocal “Yes.”

The premier occasions for articulating the Confederate jeremiad would be the same as the North’s: public fast days and thanksgiving days. The mission was to articulate the terms of God’s national covenant with the Confederacy, and to interpret the meaning of current events within those terms. The special days were proclaimed by non-clerical public officials, chiefly the President, and observed by civil law throughout the land. Although the frequency of fasts ebbed or flowed depending on the state of battles and public affairs, fast days never disappeared. Instead, they stood as ritual markers to proclaim a “peculiar peoplehood” modeled on ancient Israel.⁹

In Richmond, the Reverend O.S. Barten explained that God recognized the collective nation as a “moral person” and rewarded or punished it in *this* world because—like all nations—it would have no existence in the afterlife: “Nations are but aggregates of individuals who compose them, and what God requires of one in his individual capacity, he demands of the whole in their associated character.”¹⁰ Battlefield defeats were God’s punishments for the sins of the southern people, while victories were signs of God’s pleasure.

For the Confederacy to adopt the public fast day as its own national ritual of self-affirmation, a profound revolution had to take place in a highly compressed period.

Where the Puritans took two generations to invent a rhetoric of nationhood and war

⁹ See Harry S. Stout and Christopher Grasso, “Civil War, Religion, and Communications: The Case of Richmond,” in Randall M. Miller, et. al., eds., Religion and the American Civil War (New York, 1998), 313-59..

¹⁰ O. S. Barten, A Sermon Preached in St. James Church (Richmond, 1861), 8-9.

around the ritual convention of the fast and thanksgiving days, the Confederacy achieved it in a year, and it grew thereafter until the very last battles were lost—and beyond. Public fast sermons enlisted Christianity for ritual and ideological service to the Confederacy, even though Southern churches for decades had reflexively affirmed the apolitical “spirituality” of the church, and with it the principle that they would say nothing about civil or political affairs (an argument they would return to again after the war as grounds for silence on the subjects of segregation and Jim Crow). While ministers would continue to celebrate the historical spirituality of the southern pulpit, they would at the same time ring the charges of tyranny against the North and preach political liberty for the South with a ferocity—and frequency—unmatched in the North.

For southern clergy, like the northern clergy, the war proved to be irretrievably costly. As clergy rushed headlong to promote the war effort and the Presidents who conducted it, they found themselves simultaneously liberated and co-opted. They would be freed to expand their pulpit commentary and religious press from “spirituality” to politics and support for the war.¹¹ But in that very liberation, they would be captured by the state and its political agenda. Once set, it was a trap they never escaped for the duration of the war—and beyond.

The language of the covenant and jeremiad was hardly limited to the clergy. Indeed, the power of the jeremiad lay in its flexibility and its inclusivity. Statesmen and generals, intellectuals and journalists, housewives and children could invoke it no less

¹¹ Before the Civil War, virtually all southern Protestants agreed that the doctrine of the spirituality of the church precluded the sort of “federal covenant” on which public fasts rested and through which “political sermons” were preached. See John H. Leith, “Spirituality of the Church,” in Samuel S. Hill, ed., Encyclopedia of Religion in the South (Macon, Ga. 1984), 731.; and James Oscar Farmer, The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values (Macon, Ga., 1986), 256-60.

than pastors. For the jeremiad to work as a ritual of social order all had to be true believers. This is precisely what happened as the language took on the status of deep national myth.

Throughout the lifetime of the Confederacy, nearly three-quarters of all printed sermons would be public fast or thanksgiving sermons or similar political and war-related sermons preached on other days. Once a rarity in Southern print, these sermons became a staple religious product of the Confederate press. Religious publications as a whole, excluding periodicals, would amount to over 40 percent of the unofficial imprints appearing in the Confederacy.¹² Of course, printed sermons represented only a small fraction of the total fast and thanksgiving sermons preached in the Confederacy during the Civil War. But they remain a useful index to what was heard publicly throughout the Confederacy in churches and synagogues of all faiths and denominations—and what was preached to soldiers in the army.

Once the Confederacy was educated in the moral logic of the jeremiad through sermons, newspaper comments, and presidential proclamations, southerners truly internalized the message. Each victory would be interpreted as God's work, a gracious favor just short of the miraculous that signified a triumph of divine justice. A defeat, however, was never a sign that the cause was not righteous, or that God had deserted His chosen people, but rather that God was purifying His people through the fires of adversity so that they would come to depend only on Him. At that point, victory would be

¹² Data calculated from Marjorie Lyle Crandall, Confederate Imprints: A Check List Based Principally on the Collection of the Boston Athenaeum (Boston, 1955), and Richard Harwell, More Confederate Imprints (Richmond, 1957). Crandall and Harwell list 1,146 religious titles in 2,828 unofficial publications (these figures exclude periodicals, newspapers, and sheet music).

granted.¹³ It is precisely for this reason, that people on both sides of the conflict never seriously thought about the possibility of defeat; their theology would not allow it. Nor did many weigh the costs. The jeremiad taught them that God—not man—was determining the costs and proportions so that all one could do was absorb the butcher’s bill and pay with reverence.

For their part, northern Christian Republicans were certain that secession was not only politically untenable, but ultimately a sin against God because ultimately, America was God’s country and not merely “we the people’s” country. By thus presenting the Union in absolutist moral terms, northern voices imputed the same moral urgency—and global redemption—to political union and “democracy” that abolitionists had injected into universal emancipation.¹⁴ It was this very absolutism for “Union” among Republicans, and “emancipation” among abolitionists that made it difficult for either Northern wing to support the other’s moral platform in the early stages of the war. For their part, Northern Democrats and Confederate moral critics perceived from the outset how easily unionism and abolitionism could come together and be fused into one moral absolute with devastating consequences—consequences that would dictate a total war for unconditional surrender and involuntary reconstruction. Indeed, by overestimating the strength and numbers of northern abolitionists, Confederates assumed such a fusion from the start, so that when emancipation was eventually proclaimed by Lincoln, no southerner was surprised or aroused in any way like the North.

¹³ See Daniel W. Stowell, Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863-1877 (New York, 1998), 1-48.

¹⁴ On the transformation of anti-slavery from “gradualism” to “immediatism” once the category of “sin” was invoked see David Brion Davis’s classic essay: “The Emergence of Immediatism in British and American Antislavery Thought,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 49 (1962), 209-30.

On Sunday afternoon, July 21, 1861, the first big battle was fought at Bull Run, Virginia. Citizens gathered to witness the splendid battle they anticipated, some with picnic lunches in hand. But soon the scene would turn unimaginably ugly. After initial Yankee gains, the rebels regrouped under their intrepid commander Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson and turned the apparent Federal gains into an unseemly rout. When a Confederate shell hit a wagon on Cub Run Bridge, blocking the Federal retreat, Federal troops panicked and soon became ungovernable. Soldiers mingled with congressmen and sightseers in a frantic retreat. Only a spirited rearguard defense, hastily organized by a grizzled Mexican War veteran and former banker, Colonel William Tecumseh Sherman, prevented a wholesale rout of Federal forces. Unlike the “political” generals with no formal training, the West Point-hardened Sherman held on. In doing so, his brigade suffered higher casualties than that of any other Union commander.¹⁵

A jubilant President Davis turned up on horseback at the battlefield to witness the capture of hundreds of Union prisoners and savor “his” victory. Instead of celebrating victory (and in the process setting off a fight for bragging rights with General Beauregard), Davis should have been urging his soldiers on. But that would have required an experienced military mind that Davis only thought he possessed. Fortunately for the Union, the Confederates were equally unprepared for a real battle and failed to pursue and destroy McDowell’s army. Davis’s failure to order a night pursuit into Washington cost him the Confederacy’s best opportunity to end the war on Confederate

¹⁵ See William C. Davis, Battle at Bull Run: A History of the First Major Campaign of the Civil War (Baton Rouge, 1977), 193-98, 248-49.

terms. Heavy rains the next day erased all opportunity for a Confederate knockout victory, and Washington D.C. remained safely in Federal hands.¹⁶

The toll from Bull Run seemed incredible enough at the time, and to disbelieving eyes lined up at telegraph offices and reading newspapers, probably had greater effect than later battlefield reports that would yield far larger numbers. Citizens on both sides were startled to learn that combined casualties totaled 5,000. The shock lay in the fact that almost as many Americans had been killed at Bull Run as in the entire Mexican war fought fourteen years earlier (an unjust American war if ever there was one). Sadly, those numbers would pale in contrast to the carnage to follow.

Throughout the Confederacy, sermons and ecclesiastical reports invoked battlefield successes to proclaim the divine truth of the southern jeremiad's message. The Presbyterian Synod of Virginia's annual report in 1862 would identify the public fast as the cause of victory at Bull Run or Manassas: "At first God did not seem to smile on our defensive operations . . . Then God put it into the heart of [President] Davis to call for a day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer . . . The united supplication of the whole people went up before the God of battles and was graciously accepted through the intercession of our great High Priest . . . We were wonderfully delivered out of the hands of our enemies."¹⁷

If Fort Sumter prompted northern moderates to support war rather than secession in April, the bloodshed at Bull Run three months later prompted them to hate the enemy as malicious and effective killers who, without formal recognition as a nation,

¹⁶ See Clement Eaton, Jefferson Davis (New York, 1977), 138.

¹⁷ Presbyterian Synod of Virginia, Annual Report 1862 (Richmond, 1862).

nevertheless fought as a nation—and savagely at that. No moral reflection on the rules of war surfaced, even in the religious press—only a demand for blood revenge. A writer for the New York Evangelist wrote:

We are now opening our eyes to the unwelcome fact that they are enemies of the country, and must be dealt with as TRAITORS. This once settled, scruples fast vanish about the mode of conducting the war. We feel bound to use every means in our power to put down a rebellion which is striking at the very life of the nation.¹⁸

At the same time that the *Evangelist* advocated using “every means in our power,” it issued a bold and prescient proposal, certain to support a total war:

When hundreds and thousands of our brave young soldiers are brought home from the bloody field; when there is a cry in the land, like the wailing in Egypt, because in every house there is one dead, the question will be asked: why not make a speedy end of this dreadful business by at once proclaiming freedom to the slaves?... Whatever rights they [southerners] had before as loyal citizens, they have forfeited by their treason and rebellion.¹⁹

The South, too, saw the prospect of total war at Bull Run. On September 26, 1861, a day that northern churches spent in fasting, the Charleston *Mercury* carried an ominous report, “Negro Slaves Contraband of War”:

These virtuous Abolitionists of New England, when they can steal or get into possession of the negro slaves of Maryland and Virginia, no longer talk of emancipation. They take possession of them as property...It is not enough that we arm and go forth to battle—we must do so with the desperate conviction that we fight along the edge of the precipice...We must smite unsparingly, with sweeping vengeance, and not merely conquer, but destroy! It is our homes that are invaded by the robber and the outlaw—our firesides, our wives, women and children. Sons of the South, be men! Be men!²⁰

¹⁸ The New York Evangelist, July 25, 1861.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The Charleston Mercury, July 26, 1861. The “contraband” designation applied to slaves was invented in May 1861.

In the wake of Bull Run, northern clergymen faced the difficult task of balancing a just cause with a disastrous defeat. Somehow the two had to be kept simultaneously in view if the right lessons were to be learned. God favored the North, but besetting sins obviously had led Him to chastise the North before He would grant them deliverance.

In Hartford, the Reverend Horace Bushnell (YDS 1832), perhaps second only to Henry Ward Beecher as the voice of the white Protestant North, preached a sermon on the Sunday following Bull Run entitled *Reverses Needed*. The sermon was widely circulated and excerpted in the religious and secular press.²¹

The reasons for the sermon's importance are not hard to discover. From the start, it offered an apologia of suffering that would transcend trite appeals to Sabbath observance (northern sabbatarians blamed defeat on the fact that the generals attacked on a Sunday), and addressed the very meaning of America. Bushnell's question was not original to him and it would never disappear from American public discourse: Was the nation merely a political republic or was it a *Christian* republic, conditioned by its Puritan legacy to be a self-consciously covenant people? For the Confederacy, as was already evident, this was not an issue. They cast themselves from the start as an indissoluble Christian-Republic. But for the North, an ambiguity existed that could, in Bushnell's view, prove fatal to the Republic.

Bushnell was angry, and not only at the slaveholding South. He was angry at the fact of defeat, and he was angry with his nation's secular evolution, which, he believed, had prompted it. The Confederate cause was evil, but the rhetoric of being a Christian

²¹ For a classic description of Bushnell's "Christian interpretation," see William Clebsch, "Christian Interpretations of the Civil War," *Church History*, 30 (1961), 212-22; and Robert Bruce Mullin, *Puritan as Yankee: A Life of Horace Bushnell* (Grand Rapids, 2002).

nation was correct. This was what God wanted to see for the righteous North. For Bushnell, this meant that Americans must recognize the mistakes and shortcomings of the Founding Fathers. And not only them, but also any present politicians who accepted the Fathers' secular sentiments uncritically, including President Lincoln. The greatest transgression was neither petty sins nor poor leadership, but bad philosophy. Bushnell's idea of freedom was not grounded in Lockean and Jeffersonian epistemology nor the naturalistic premises of the Declaration of Independence, but in the Puritans.

Without ever mentioning Lincoln by name, Bushnell complained:

Our statesmen, or politicians, not being generally religious men, take up with difficulty conceptions of government, or the foundations of government, that suppose the higher rule of God... Our political theories never gave us a real nationality, but only a copartnership, and the armed treason is only the consummated result of our speculations. Where nothing exists but a consent, what can be needed to end it but a dissent?²²

Left only with Jeffersonian categories and Lincoln's "political religion" of republicanism, no transcendent ground remained to oppose secession, for there was no higher cause superintended by a higher power. In this case, the success or failure of secession rested solely on coercion and superior firepower, not morality. Republicanism without God—and a non-Christian Constitution—was immoral. The perpetuation of a truly providential government, as distinct from an "abstract" government grounded in natural-law theories of contract, was its own moral imperative for a just war. To signify this, Bushnell added his voice to the clamor for a constitutional amendment invoking God.

²² *Ibid.*, 14. For a similar arguments see, e.g., *The Christian Instructor and Western United Presbyterian*, November 6, 1861; or George P. Fisher, *A Sermon Preached in the Chapel of Yale College* (New Haven, 1861), 8.

No surprisingly, Confederate preachers and moralists continued to celebrate the inclusion of God in their Constitution.²³ In his thanksgiving sermon, preached at Flat Rock, South Carolina, Edward Reed reiterated that the Federal Constitution was flawed: “Whether through inadvertence, or, as is unfortunately more probable, from infidel practices imbibed in France by some members of the Convention...it contained no recognition of God. Our present Constitution opens with a confession of the existence and providence of the Almighty.”²⁴

This, Reed exulted, continued in the aftermath of Bull Run: “To see the supreme legislature of a people, in the first moment of decisive victory, turning its hall of legislation into a temple, returning solemn thanks to almighty God, and then adjourning for the day is a spectacle which fills the heart of the Christian patriot with the liveliest joy.”²⁵

Not all states were as comfortable as the Confederate clergy and the insulated northeast with the justness of the war. Missouri’s experience with a savage civil war within its own borders, waged indiscriminately on civilians dispelled all romantic and world-regenerative illusions. The Reverend R. H. Weller’s fast sermon to Christ Church, in Saint Joseph, Missouri, contained no patriotism, and is illustrative of what other ministers *could* have said, but seldom did.

In the face of mounting terrorist attacks fought in the name of patriotism, Weller assigned equal guilt and culpability to the North and the South: “Is it not a repetition of the sad calamity that befell Israel of old, —a disrupted country, with rival capitals, and

²³ See, e.g., Ferdinand Jacobs, A Sermon For the Times (Marion, AL, 1861).

²⁴ Edward Reed, A People Saved by the Lord (Charleston, 1861), 9.

²⁵ Ibid., 10. For similar sentiments, see also, George D. Armstrong, The Good Hand of our God Upon Us (Norfolk, Va., 1861), 14.

the hands of brethren embued in brethrens blood?” Though nominally Christian, “our practice has given the lie to our pretensions, and practically we are a nation of infidels.” Such words, he knew, would not endear him to those aching for a fight. Talk of peace was downright offensive “amidst the heat of passion, and the lynx-eyed gaze of partisanship.”

In contrast to northern preachers who would declare that “law is vengeance,” Weller preached reconciliation. In place of patriotism, he proclaimed peace: “Let us strive to lay aside passion and prejudice—to hold fast to charity—to covet the good things of God’s blessing, the things which make for peace...”²⁶ The paucity of sermons like Weller’s reveals the real object of fasts and days of prayer: to promote patriotism and an unquestionably just war.

Victory might be glorious, but the civilians in Richmond tasted battle to an unsettling degree. It should be no surprise then that they were among the first to become true believers. The themes of the jeremiad dominated local, unpublished oratory as well as printed sermons and official pronouncements. Few unpublished sermons remain from the midst of war, but one remarkably complete selection survives from Richmond’s Jeremiah Bell Jeter, pastor of the Third Baptist Church, co-founder of the Southern Baptist Convention, teacher at Richmond College, and “reluctant” slave owner.

Throughout the war, Jeter preached weekly in Richmond at the Grace Street Baptist Church. At the front of his sermon booklet he wrote: “This volume of notes was

²⁶ R. H. Weller, The Two Firebrands (St. Joseph, MO, 1861), 5, 8, 11.

prepared during the war. Many sermons I prepared during that trying period with the roar of battle in my ears.”²⁷

When word reached Richmond in late June 1862 that Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson had attacked on the Peninsula and pushed General George McClellan’s mighty army away from the city, Jeter promptly penned a thanksgiving sermon “on the occasion of the national victories.” The coincidence of victory with another fast was to Jeter’s eye, clearly causal. At first, “it was a dark day for the Confederacy.” But then the Confederacy knelt in national humiliation, and in response, God smiled upon His people. Apart from some naval defeats, victory occurred on almost every front. “The siege of Richmond has been raised;” the enemy was on the defensive. What meaning should be taken from this? Victories “are not to be ascribed to the number or skill of our troops—not to the superiority of our generals—but to the divine hand.”²⁸ Like virtually all of his peers, North and South, Jeter had no moral commentary on the scale of carnage. Throughout the war, this would remain a taboo subject.

With commentary such as this, it is not surprising that the fast was rapidly becoming a martial totem. Through their prayers, ministers and people could share in the glory for “their” victory. Theologically, ministers agreed that fasts or thanksgivings could not magically insure earthly triumphs. But when victories came, they simply could not resist the assumption that their piety had commended—or at least cajoled—God’s orchestration of events in the field. Had a defeat followed the fast, ministers would either say nothing or complain that the people were not sufficiently sincere. In the inclusive

²⁷ Jeremiah Bell Jeter’s sermon notes are preserved at the Baptist Historical Society in Richmond. Special thanks to the society and its director, Fred Anderson, for access to these notebooks. All quotations are taken from the microfilm collection at the Baptist Historical Society.

²⁸ J. B. Jeter, “Notes and Sermons,” Virginia Baptist Historical Society.

world of the jeremiad, “incompetence” in the field was not a sufficient explanation for defeat. In this sense the homefront could also share in the shame of “their” common defeat.

In concluding this first lecture I should nod briefly to our present days and say that I’m always struck at the way news writers and politicians routinely treat events in the present as new and unprecedented. We hear a lot today about “moral majorities,” a “Christian America” just wars fought in the name of American goodness. The overlapping of religion and politics could hardly be more blatant. And we hear it as though it has just been invented by 21st century (primarily) Republicans. But a review of the moral and religious arguments put forward in the Civil War reveals that contemporary rhetoric about a Christian America is at least as old as the Republican party founded in 1856. As I wrote my book, and then these lectures, the echoes between past and present were ear shattering. Flag culture permeates both; a “Christian Republic” stands in the balance, and wars for “freedom” have God on their side.

Sadly, in the two lectures to follow we will encounter other parallels to our world today, both in the domain of proportionality (in lecture two) and discrimination (in lecture three).

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