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History of Christianity in the United States and Canada (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

History of Christianity in the United States and Canada, by Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992). 576 pages, paperback, \$29.95. Reviewed by Hubert Krygman, Instructor of History.

This latest work from Mark Noll is significant in several respects. Its breadth demonstrates Noll's ability to synthesize a wide body of literature and encompass nearly four centuries of North American history, and marks his stature as a leading historian of religion in America. Moreover, as a broad survey text, it reflects the extent of scholarship and interest during the last quarter century concerning the history of Christianity in North America. And given Noll's role at Wheaton College, it indicates the flowering of self-reflective scholarship at one of the centers of American evangelicalism.

As the title suggests, Noll's distinct approach to this topic focuses on "Christianity," but adopts a supra-national North American scope. In contrast to George Marsden's recent survey on "religion" in American culture, Noll's intention is to examine the more limited topic of Christianity in America, which he locates primarily in theological beliefs, ecclesiastical institutions, cultic practices, and spiritual experience. At the same time, Noll also aims to include within his purview the broad diversity of Christians who have been marginalized from the American mainstream, and to relate this American Christianity to a world-wide body of believers so as to offer comparative evaluation. In short, Noll attempts to distinguish the history of Christianity as it cuts across national cultures in order to discover how the Christian faith has "fared in America". Such an approach, he avers, admits more readily an interpretation "from the standards of Christian faith," and offers "lessons" most pertinent to the Christian churches (3).

Despite its diversity of themes, the central thread of Noll's story is still the formation of American evangelicalism. Though little new research is offered, Noll does well to survey the expanse of current scholarship and to disclose a coherent order to the array of Christian communities in North America. He shows how post-Reformation dissenters and enthusiasts were able, in the wide open spaces of the New World, to challenge traditionally established authorities. Ironically, Roger Williams' assertion of the primacy of faith of the heart, against Puritan authorities who themselves had emphasized conversion of the heart and sought religious liberty in the new land, exemplifies the early transitions from established forms of Christianity to American evangelicalism (58-60). Pluralism and lay participation, according to Noll, became the norms in America. These norms became universally

and distinctly American during the Great Awakening. Even while they worked to revive and extend "Christian civilization" across an expanding American society, Awakeners shifted the contours of the faith from Puritan covenantal Calvinism to Wesleyan and Moravian pietism. Consequently, the seeds of sectarian diversity were rooted in common commitments to voluntarism and individual spiritual experience. Not only did this emergent evangelicalism become the "soul" of the American identity, but in the mid-century political context, it provided the model, and many of the commitments, that fostered the American revolution. Indeed, evangelical Christians invested republican concern for liberty with the millennial hope of Christian civilization.

The identity of "Protestant America" was completed during the nineteenth century, according to Noll, in a synthesis of evangelical and republican commitments. As evangelicals mobilized to Christianize the frontiers of American society, they did so also under the influence of republican concern for individual liberty and virtue, optimism about human nature, and Common Sense confidence in the veracity of objective science. Hence, the American Protestant identity featured the final, rapid shift from Calvinism to Methodist individual pietism, the moral perfectionism of Taylor and Finney, and a plethora of voluntary cross-denominational organizations dedicated to reforming American society. Though this evangelical identity helped to bring a cohesion to American diversity, it also came to function, Noll suggests, as a new establishment for an "evangelical empire" (164). Committed to preserving and extending the American version of "Christian civilization," and entangled in its political and social structures, mainstream evangelicals generally failed to embrace Christians on the margins, like Native and African Americans. Especially during the Civil War, evangelicalism came to serve as a civil religion, identifying either North or South "with the concerns of God," and investing their victory with millennial significance (331). For Noll, the Civil War was the apogee of Protestant America.

Although missing some of the nuances of debate among Canadian scholars, Noll's review of Canadian developments is credible and well-integrated into his story as an alternative "third way" of relating Christianity and culture. In Canada, also, pluralism prevailed, most emphatically in the success of the Catholic establishment

despite the British conquest of Quebec in 1760. Canada's Protestants, derived mainly from Loyalist and British origins, shared much in common with American evangelicals, but consciously repudiated republicanism and individualism. Instead they emphasized preservation of the social order and traditional ties with Europe, and were more committed than Americans to unity of the Christian community and to social responsibility. As exemplified in the education debates of the nineteenth century, Noll finds that Canadian Christians (particularly Protestants) reconciled evangelical piety with a form of establishment which, though it left church and state disentangled in education, nevertheless accepted a structured pluralism and a common view of the role of religion in public morality.

Ultimately, however, Noll concludes that Christianity fared no better in Canada than it did in America. In both cases, perhaps even moreso in Canada, the commitment of Christians to existing cultural forms left their societies vulnerable to secularization. Whether during the conflict of the Civil War, or the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, Christianity no longer seemed to offer universal and transcendent certitude. As the intellectual and social structures of modern North American civilization were reshaped in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christianity was either frankly abandoned in favour of science, humanism, and materialism, or gradually surrendered to those new values.

Yet Noll does not despair about secularization, which he defines as a shift in focus "from the sacred toward a greater concentration on the circumstances of this world (425)." In the midst of the "wilderness" of secular modernity, Noll points to cases of the rediscovery of Christian faith, and devotion to living by gospel ideals. Albeit in disguise, secularization, Noll suggests, may be a blessing that frees Christians from the burden of commitments to their host cultures, to travel more faithfully the Way of Christ.

Noll's interpretation of North American Christianity, cast in terms of Augustine's classical eschatological tension between the other-worldly city of God and the temporal city of Man, is deeply critical of evangelicalism and yet shares its long commitment to Augustinianism (33, 380-381). Though Noll's criticisms are appreciated, one may well wonder whether he has misconstrued the problematic. Arguably, it is precisely through this Augustinian world-view that evangelicals allied their Christianity with

"secular" culture. Unfortunately, Noll offers little concise analysis of how evangelicals allied their faith with secularized culture. For example, his comments on evangelicals and the American revolution charitably treat Jefferson as a "heterodox" Christian, and suggest briefly that republican "natural political axioms" (132) were "compatible" with Christianity. Noll's organization does not help to shine light on this alliance, since he examines, again very briefly, the integration of evangelicalism and Enlightenment thought only in post-Revolution America, and thereby neglects the long engagement of evangelicals with the Enlightenment at least from Jonathon Edwards and John Wesley to John Witherspoon. Likewise, Noll's emphasis on the conservatism of Canadian evangelicals veils the liberal dimensions of the politics and philosophy of public education, and the later development of modernist Protestant thought. Although Noll refers often to the interaction of religion and culture, his identification of Christianity with church and theology treats other cultural activities as essentially extraneous to Christianity. Thus his attempt to disentangle Christianity and North American culture in some ways obscures evangelicals' divided world-view, and their deep commitments to both worlds: a secularized temporal world and an other-worldly salvation.

In the end, Noll's impressionistic assessment of the twentieth century wilderness, though certainly suggestive, may leave the Christian community in the lurch. Given the post-war resurgence of televangelism, gospel music, and the Moral Majority, it seems less than evident that evangelical Christianity has, for better or worse, disentangled itself from contemporary American culture. But more generally, is the separation of Christianity and culture to be expected, or desired? Put another way, are "law and gospel" to be held apart in tension or "delicate balance," (62) or is the gospel *for* the creation order? Christians inescapably must live their salvation, "with fear and trembling," not only in the cultural forms of church and theology, but also in politics, philosophy, science, and art. The problematic of North American Christians may be not so much their entanglement with cultural forms, but the specific way that their pietism has hindered their development of a consistently faithful culture, and led them to acquiesce in a secularized culture and society. While the disentanglement of Christianity from secularized North American culture may be welcome, it also compels us to work at an alternative Christian culture.

Men at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional Roles & Modern Options, by Jack Balswick (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992). 218 pages, paperback, \$9.99. Reviewed by Charles Veenstra, Professor of Communication.

"These are hard times for men. American society is short-changing males" (19), says Jack Balswick, professor of sociology and family development at Fuller Theological Seminary. Much has been written in the last generation by feminists who have encouraged men to discard the male

script that guided men. At the outset, then, this book appears a welcome balance. In addressing the challenges men face, the author attempts to develop a Christian perspective for men to follow in their relationships.

Balswick begins by tracing various explanations that