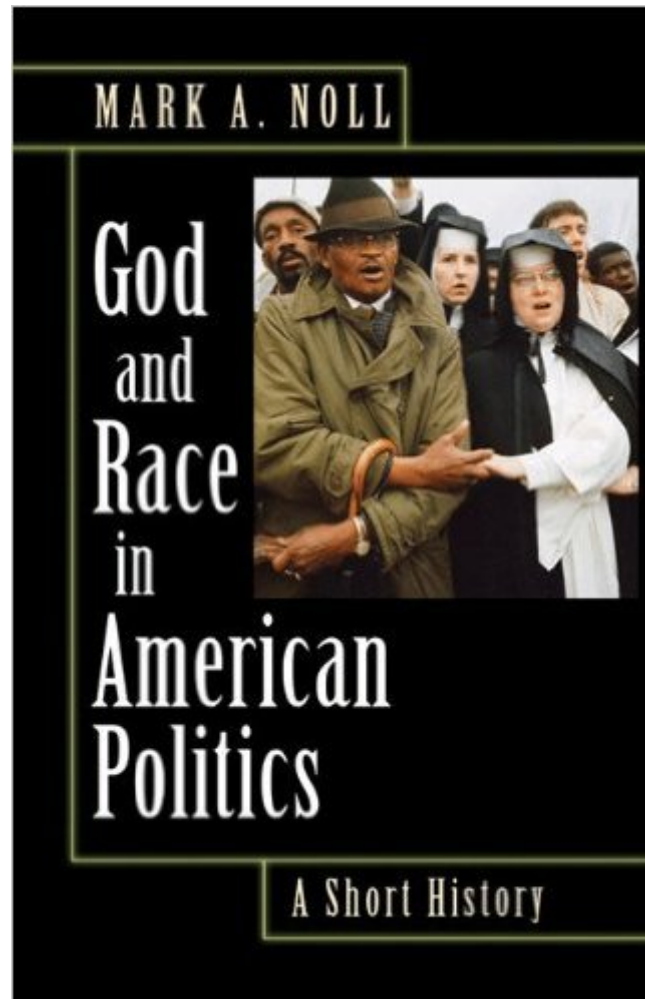


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God And Race In American Politics: A Short History



Synopsis

Religion has been a powerful political force throughout American history. When race enters the mix the results have been some of our greatest triumphs as a nation--and some of our most shameful failures. In this important book, Mark Noll, one of the most influential historians of American religion writing today, traces the explosive political effects of the religious intermingling with race. Noll demonstrates how supporters and opponents of slavery and segregation drew equally on the Bible to justify the morality of their positions. He shows how a common evangelical heritage supported Jim Crow discrimination and contributed powerfully to the black theology of liberation preached by Martin Luther King Jr. In probing such connections, Noll takes readers from the 1830 slave revolt of Nat Turner through Reconstruction and the long Jim Crow era, from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s to "values" voting in recent presidential elections. He argues that the greatest transformations in American political history, from the Civil War through the civil rights revolution and beyond, constitute an interconnected narrative in which opposing appeals to Biblical truth gave rise to often-contradictory religious and moral complexities. And he shows how this heritage remains alive today in controversies surrounding stem-cell research and abortion as well as civil rights reform. *God and Race in American Politics* is a panoramic history that reveals the profound role of religion in American political history and in American discourse on race and social justice.

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Customer Reviews

I very much respect Mark Noll's work as a historian. So after re-reading *The Civil War as Theological Crisis* I found *God and Race in American Politics*. Noll is primarily known as a historian

of North American Evangelicalism. But this is a natural followup to his Civil War as Theological Crisis. Instead of looking at the theological response to issues of race and slavery (as he did in Civil War), Noll expands his view to take a quick survey at how Race and Religion interacted over the history of the US until the 2004 Presidential Election. As you might expect a good historian to say, the reality is much more complicated than the traditional story that is told in your 4th grade US history class. But Noll does a very good job surveying those complications in less than 200 pages. His first chapter covers a lot of similar ground as the Civil War as theological crisis. Essentially, the common reading of the bible prior to the Civil War was that slavery was a biblical practice, and calling for the end of slavery as a theological statement for most people meant that they had to reject the common reading of scripture and be accused of rejecting orthodox Christianity. And many abolitionists did explicitly reject Christianity (or at least the more orthodox forms of Christianity). But here, Noll spends a good bit of time observing that it was not slavery, but racially based slavery that was the real issue. The widespread belief in white racial superiority meant that Christians were able to accept the plain reading of scripture that said that slavery was acceptable, but not the plain reading of scripture that said that Blacks were of one faith with Whites. This became even more pronounced in the post-civil war era.

This book is an attempt to create a historical synthesis between religion and race in American history. It's a very ambitious work that tries to work its way from the religious battles over slavery to the civil rights movement to present-day politics. The author's notion of the American Civil War as a religious dispute is not new in the book. What is new is the author's attempt to expand the scope of that argument to cover a whole lot more historical ground in what amounts to a small number of pages. I should also say that this book is in actuality less true book than a combined rehash of a lecture series Noll did a few years ago. I don't tend to like books of that format. They pretend on the surface to be serious studies of a topic but in end turn out to be far less. I would rather see a lecture series presented in book form as a lecture series as opposed to these sorts of books which display high aspirations but turn out to be short and superficial. High on opinion and conclusions. Short on making a strong case. The book's flaws are that its scope is too large, its conclusions are too broad, there is an accusatory attitude toward those he doesn't like and fawning praise heaped on those he does like. While there are some interesting ideas pursued, the author simply lacks the analytical judgement to produce a useful study. And he has a very big axe to grind that undermines everything he tries to do. The book spends far too much time tracing the history of African-American Christianity after the civil war. While this is a worthy subject, it's too much material for the size of the book. Noll

makes the mistake of putting interesting material ahead of creating support for the points he wants to make.

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