Book Review Forum

Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War. By **E. Brooks Holifield**. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003. ix + 617 pp. $35.00 cloth.

After Ahlstrom

Back when I was in graduate school, books were cheap. Even on a spartan budget, I could afford Sydney Ahlstrom's *Religious History of the American People*. I splurged on the hardcover edition since it seemed like a book that might come in handy. The more daunting challenge was lugging this behemoth back to my apartment and trying to master its contents.

What impressed me most about Mr. Ahlstrom's big book was his ability to explain complicated matters simply. To discover that he possessed that talent surprised me, because Mr. Ahlstrom's lectures and seminars unfolded in ways that can only be described as stream-of-consciousness. One moment he would be holding forth on the Half-Way Covenant, and in the next he had shifted to Native American revitalization movements, having made pit stops in between alluding to Jonathan Edwards's views on free will and Emerson's Over-Soul. Whatever inner logic drew Mr. Ahlstrom from one topic to the next was elusive, to say the least. But he trusted his students to discover those links for themselves, and his confidence was heartening. A fellow graduate student once confided to me that he had met with Mr. Ahlstrom while reading for his doctoral exams and admitted to having trouble organizing all the ideas and events of American religious history. "Everything is running together," my friend grimly confessed, whereupon Mr. Ahlstrom lit up with genuine delight and replied, "That's good! That's the way it happened!"

Alas, books come much dearer now. That being the case, three questions confront all students of American religious history who hope that, sooner or later, everything will run together: First, if you already own a copy of Sydney Ahlstrom's big book, should you also invest in the big book written by one of his most accomplished students, Brooks Holifield? Second, if you decide that Holifield's *Theology in America* might come in handy, should you wait for the paperback edition—or perhaps skip the book altogether and wait for the movie? Third, if you have already purchased Mark Noll's *America's God*—which also offers a sweeping overview of theological development between European colonization and the Civil War—can you skip Holifield completely—the book, the movie, the works?

All three of these questions will weigh most heavily with the most junior members in our field. Can you pick and choose among these imposing "doorstops" as you prepare for your doctoral examinations, write your dissertations, or crib for your lectures? Can you convince the senior folks in our profession—those whom Grant Wacker calls the "woolly-bullies"—that you know enough theology by reading just one of these books?

The short answer to all the above is: No. You should own all three books, and I would even recommend springing for hardcover, as they will come in handy and endure frequent use. Here is why: Sydney Ahlstrom's big book still stands as the primer, the text that still offers the most comprehensive overview of *all* of American religious development. Mark Noll's big book will

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long hold pride of place as the most compelling effort to mainstream the story of theological development into the master narrative of American history by detailing the symbiotic relationship between evangelical culture and political culture in the new nation. And Brooks Holifield's big book marks the point of departure from which all students of American religion must either begin or reorient their understanding of how ideas about the deity and its dealings with humankind evolved from Christian antiquity through the early modern period and finally assumed myriad forms in America over 250 years.

Holifield's big book is less sweeping in its chronology and less encyclopedic in its scope than Ahlstrom's big book. While Ahlstrom takes us from the Puritans of the seventeenth century through the Pentecostals and New Age movements of the late twentieth century, Holifield's account ends with the Civil War. Ahlstrom also offers substantially more coverage—even in the colonial era—of Catholicism and Judaism as well as Protestant sects like German Pietists. Even so, the ambition and achievement of Holifield's study is stunning: with far more precision and depth than Ahlstrom's work, Professor Holifield traces with unfailing lucidity and remarkable succinctness the varieties of ideas entertained by American theologians, particularly those within the dominant Reformed tradition. The result is an indispensable and exhaustive source for any reader who wants to get down with the details—including a capsule intellectual lineage—of what any major theologian between John Cotton and Charles Finney thought about sin and salvation, grace and virtue, the atonement and the millennium, and much, much more.

But what wins the confidence—to say nothing of the undying gratitude—of the gentle reader is the satisfying analytical unity of Professor Holifield's big book. He organizes his narrative around several key coordinates for plotting the trajectory of Christian theology's evolution in early America, but the theme that looms largest in his account concerns the understanding of reason in religion. Professor Holifield argues that most American theologians in the centuries before the Civil War shared a common concern—indeed, a "preoccupation"—with establishing the reasonableness of Christianity and that they shared a common strategy for advancing that defense. During the eighteenth century and largely in response to challenges from both European and homegrown deists, the successors of New England theologians adopted what Professor Holifield calls "evidentialism." That evidentialist position consisted of the claim that rational evidence confirmed the uniqueness and truth of biblical revelation, and it drew heavily on both natural theology and the "evidences" of miracles and prophecies in scripture.

The determination to uphold the reasonableness of Christianity through the evidentialist approach gathered its greatest force during the early decades of the nineteenth century. But, according to Professor Holifield, it was not unique to professional theologians in America: on the contrary, it was shared both by their counterparts in Europe and by their "populist" challengers in the new republic, a diverse group, but one unified behind the claim that the humble were as reliable as the learned in interpreting the Bible. It is the affinity for evidentialism among the populists that comes as the greater surprise, of course, and it is a tribute to the subtlety of Professor Holifield's analysis that, despite his emphasis on class conflict in the reconfiguring of Protestant theology, he complicates his story by drawing our attention to this underlying consensus. For all that divided professional theologians within the ranks of the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Uni-

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tarians from the upstart populists who abounded in the ranks of the early Methodists and Baptists, the Restorationists and the Universalists, the Shakers, Mormons, and Hicksite Quakers, they saw eye to eye when it came to affirming the reasonableness of Christianity and even agreed on what reasonableness meant. Indeed, until the middle of the nineteenth century, Christian evidentialism met with enthusiastic acceptance in the ranks of all American Christian theologians except some holdouts among the Catholics and the Lutherans and a few challengers like the transcendentalists, Horace Bushnell, and the Mercersburg theologians who proposed more intuitive modes of rationality.

This is the masterful synthesis that Professor Holifield unfolds, and we are all in his debt for giving us a brilliant and eminently teachable book. By virtue of this signal achievement, Professor Holifield has established himself as the other 800-pound gorilla in a zoo that has only two real contenders—the other, of course, being Professor Mark Noll.

So: what are the differences between these two big books, and why are those differences so important that you need to read both of them? In fact, Professors Holifield and Noll are in substantial agreement about the importance of reasonableness in the reshaping of early American theology, about the enabling role that Scottish Common Sense Realism played in that development, and about the American preference for practical as opposed to speculative theology. But they do part ways when it comes to singling out the most telling context for explaining American theological development in the new nation. Professor Noll emphasizes the pivotal influence of political culture on the evangelical tradition—specifically the appropriation of republican and liberal ideas by the leading theologians in America. By contrast, Professor Holifield stresses not only the significance of the continuing engagement with European religious inquiry among nearly all theologians in the early republic, professionals and populists alike, but also the crucial role of intensifying denominational loyalties and class tensions at home in reshaping theology.

I am inclined to regard these two interpretations as mutually sustaining rather than as mutually exclusive. In fact, the two books complement each other so admirably as to raise suspicions of a secret collaboration. Professor Holifield is right on target by emphasizing the gathering force of both denominational loyalties and class tensions between the Revolution and the Civil War. On the other hand, precisely because of the mounting competition among different churches, most farsighted thinkers among Christians of every stripe strove to align their theologies not only with reasonableness but also, as Professor Noll has demonstrated, with republicanism. Both tactics of course, also served to broaden their appeal to all classes of early national Americans.

Satisfying as the syntheses of both Professor Holifield and Noll are, their sources and methods raise for me the following question: Can we fully probe the question of context as it pertains to the evolution of American theology by focusing—as both of these books do—on analyzing the formal, published writings of theologians, whether populists or professionals? The element missing from both their accounts is any sense of the interaction between theologians and their lay public, and it seems a curious omission given how most theologians spent most of their waking hours—which was not writing theology or even reading other theologians. No matter whether you believe,

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like Professor Holifield, that most early American theologians devoted their spare time to reading European theologians or, like Professor Noll, to reading republican political treatises, those were not the only influences shaping their thought and their inner lives. On the contrary, as Professor Holifield's research shows, most American theologians before the Civil War were pastors of churches or teachers in colleges and seminaries. In the normal round of their daily lives, they were deeply engaged with parishioners or students, and especially after the Revolution, these lay men and women were an increasingly feisty, opinionated, and undeferential lot who liked to think that they knew plenty about theology even if they did not read many or any formal treatments of the subject.

There exists no shortage of diaries, letters, and church records that could be mined to recover the character and significance of conversations about theology between the clergy and the laity. What is more, it is a subject ideally suited to encourage more dialogue between scholars of religion who specialize in the history of ideas and those who specialize in social and cultural history. We could only profit by keeping closer company.

In that ecumenical spirit, this social and cultural historian wishes to thank both Professor Holifield and Professor Noll for having taught me so much and so painlessly about American theology. It is all starting to run together for me now, and I mean that in the best possible sense.

Christine Leigh Heyrman
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The Crown of a Distinguished Career

It is rare for the crowning work of a mature scholar's career to accomplish the two things that Brooks Holifield's *Theology in America* achieves so splendidly: first, a summation of the prime themes of the scholar's own earlier labors; and, second, the pioneering exploration of hitherto neglected topics, connections, and historical figures. For those of us who realize how rapidly time's winged chariot is moving along, it is also immensely heartening to recognize this dual achievement in Holifield's book. Maybe, just maybe—with a little more longevity, a great deal more insight, and a whole lot more work—we other veterans may also still hope to do something worthwhile, though I dare say that achievements of the scope and scale of this book are hard to come by for any of us at any stage of life's journey.

As a summation, Holifield's *Theology in America* is every bit as alert to the nuances of published discourse as his 1989 study of early American thought and culture.[1] It has the same interest in the bearing of church practices on formal theology as his pioneering 1974 monograph on Puritans and the sacraments.[2] It is as aware of a democratic society's fixation on practical religious outcomes as his 1983 survey of pastoral care and his 1986 treatment

1. Holifield, *Era of Persuasion: American Thought and Culture, 1521–1680* (Boston: Twayne, 1989).
2. Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570–1720* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974).

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