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The Problem with Biblical Authority

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Mark Noll's new book is a masterpiece. A monumental work of scholarship and erudition, *America's Book* merits respect for its artistry as well. The writing is lucid and well crafted. Always judicious, circumspect, and fair-minded, *America's Book* moves the reader right along, one page to the next, through 846 pages not counting front matter, in a story of enormous importance for understanding religion's role in American life.

Noll's argument is clear: the Bible played an essential, cohesive role in American identity after the Revolution. Respect for the authority of the Bible bridged differences among a variety of different, often competing groups, providing a unifying sense of cultural order that enabled the survival, growth, and expansion of America's democratic republic.

Noll offers a clear and useful discussion of the historical events that gave reliance on the Bible in the early United States a distinctive shape. To summarize, custodial protestants emerged after the Revolution with a strong sense of entitlement to social authority; as members or descendants of established churches, leaders in this group embraced strong connections between religious institutions and social order as well as freedom from British tyranny. Sectarian protestants rose to challenge them, forcing distinctions between church and state, and between religious and political authority, that collided with the custodial sensibilities. The fast-spreading popularity of Methodism muted this conflict, drawing religious attention away from political dispute and toward personal piety. Noll argues that Methodism's emphasis on personal piety played a crucial role in shaping a more widespread, less contested reliance on biblical authority that coalesced in a Bible-oriented, distinctively American civilization.

Noll goes on to explain how America's Bible civilization began to fracture. Slavery was the precipitating cause of division. Noll also points to the attendant and escalating problem of proof-texting, which led to misuse of the Bible as an arsenal of texts aimed at defending one political position and attacking others. There is a certain symmetry here; the overcoming of one form of political division to shape America's distinctive form of biblical civilization was followed by another form of political division that pulled it apart.

The argument does not end here. Allegiance to biblical authority has never disappeared, Noll argues, but did erode further after the Civil War, weakening Christian faith, and contributing to the polarization of American society today. While Noll avoids making sweeping pronouncements, the cultural history he leaves with the reader is one of moral and spiritual decline.

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Noll's good news is that white Protestants moved away from considering the Bible as a source of imagination and wonder, Black Protestant culture took root, held fast, and blossomed. Black Christians internalized Bible stories of grace and freedom in response to the injustices they suffered, making those stories their own. As evidence of the long-lasting vibrancy of this culture of biblical ownership, Noll cites the civil rights movement and "the biblical imprint on musical expression, from the spirituals first recorded at the time of the Civil War, through the celebrated tours . . . of singers from Fisk . . . and Hampton . . . to twentieth-century 'gospel' and the surprising presence of Scripture in contemporary rap" (643).

Noll concludes his narrative with the plea for divine grace made by President Barack Obama in response to the Charleston murders in 2015, citing Obama's funeral address for the AME church leader Clementa Pinckney as evidence that "the biblical resources once so prominent in the nation's history could still be brought back to life" (675).

This conclusion gave me pause. If our preeminent historian of American evangelicalism had argued for the redemptive power of Black leadership in 2008—if he had seen grace in Obama then—would it have made a difference?

But the nit I have to pick with Noll's argument is not belatedness—in 2008, who among us foresaw the shape that resentment of Obama would take, or the role that white evangelicals would play in the rise of Donald Trump? It is what Noll's argument presumes, and in presuming, overlooks, that troubles me.

His argument rests on an assumption that the written record with respect to the Bible can be taken as a more or less straightforward reflection of what Americans have believed. While the enormity of this record and Noll's skill in compiling it are impressive indeed, it is also a compendium of efforts to persuade, cajole, defend, vindicate, explain, and justify what religious writers thought people ought to believe. It is a mirror of American thought but not a complete or undistorted one.

An incident that occurred well before the Revolution offers a vivid example of what is at stake in Noll's assumption about the transparency of religious writing, and points to underlying factors that his argument sometimes overlooks. Long before Noll's account begins, Anne Hutchinson unleashed a storm of male hysteria over biblical authority not unlike the tsunami that rose up and thundered over Thomas Paine. During her civil trial in Boston in 1637, Hutchinson declared—ill-advisedly, and after considerable bullying—that she believed God spoke to her in much the same way he spoke to Abraham. This admission seemed to place what she knew to be true on the same level as scripture. As a result, she was sentenced to exile as a threat to civil order.

In the church trial that followed her trial in civil court, Hutchinson admitted to having doubts about heaven and bodily resurrection. The charges leveled against her centered on her dangerous and heretical position with respect to the biblical authority; in both trials, the relationship between biblical authority and patriarchal order was paramount. She was condemned for "dishonoring the fathers" who stood on the authority of the Bible and defined what biblical authority meant. Her attempts to defend herself only demonstrated the danger her stubbornness posed to patriarchal order. She had nothing to fall back on but the grace of God. "If you do condemn me for speaking what in my conscience I know to be truth," she told her judges, "I must commit myself unto the Lord."[1]

[1]"The Examination of Anne Hutchinson (1637)," in Thomas Hutchinson, *History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay,* http://historymuse.net/readings/examannehutchinson.html (accessed May 2023).

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A century and a half later, rage against Paine's *Age of Reason* galvanized religious publishing, setting the stage for Noll's argument. Taking the torrential denunciation of Paine as testimony to the solidity and pervasiveness of belief in biblical authority, Noll leaves the strident and defensive tone of much of this outpouringlargely unexamined. No less deserving of fuller examination is Paine's call to reason. It is not simply coincidence that the men who led the drubbing of Paine were the same men whose authority, power, and social standing were most threatened by his critique of revelation.

As Noll's narrative unfolds in the wake of the denunciation of Thomas Paine, the success of Methodism and its various offshoots takes center stage. Though never unrestrained, Noll's account of this success is largely positive. Neither the transactional aspect of some Methodist writing—salvation and social respect in exchange for practicing belief—nor Methodism's convergence with industrialization and continental expansion come in for in-depth discussion.

Noll calls attention to the unfortunate confusion between biblical authority and belief in America's providential destiny. But he does not dwell on the removal of indigenous peoples, or their abuse and forced indoctrination at the hands of Christian missionaries. Perhaps not surprisingly, those Christians who did stand up for Indian rights were often Quakers. Like Anne Hutchinson, Quakers interpreted scripture in light of the authority of conscience rather than the reverse.

While Noll is a bit dismissive of inner light, and never mentions the Emersonians who appreciated the Bible metaphorically, the ground shifts when he turns to discussion of Black Christianity. In appreciating how Black Protestants internalized scripture, Noll comes close to describing creative imagination, and the art it produces. In his fine account of Black Christianity, the supernatural aspect of biblical authority becomes profoundly experiential and metaphorical, perhaps not all that far from inner light or artistic inspiration.

Another example of the literary inspiration of the Bible, not mentioned by Noll, is Emily Dickinson, a woman who avoided public censure by keeping her poetry mostly to herself. After refusing religious conversion as a young woman, Dickinson continued to draw inspiration from the stories of the Bible and the cadences of protestant hymns. "I aimed my Pebble," Dickinson wrote,

> —but Myself
> Was all the one that fell—
> Was it Goliath—was too large—
> Or was myself—too small?[2]

The poem illustrates a crucial difference between respect for the Bible as literature and respect for the Bible as something heavier and more onerous, like Goliath. By casting herself as David, the poet makes it clear—in her coy and clever way—that God is on her side.

Dickinson's poem brings us to Noll's interest in the social foundations of democracy, and to his concern that those foundations may be crumbling without widespread reliance on something like biblical authority. A reclusive poet who spent a lot of time with her flowers might not be the obvious rejoinder. But in fact, Dickinson's trust in her own

[2]Emily Dickinson, "I Took My Power in My Hand," *Poems*, https://genius.com/Emily-dickinson-i-took-my-power-in-my-hand-540-annotated (accessed May 2023).

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humanity continues to inspire, with implications for the fellow-feeling on which democracy depends. There are only a few others of her time—Abraham Lincoln, for example—whose words are as familiar or beloved today.

Dickinson's poem raises an important question about the authority of the Bible as great literature in relation to its authority as a mainstay of patriarchal social order. But more importantly, the eventual recognition of Emily Dickinson as a great American poet supports Noll's argument about the Bible's importance for American life and culture. There is more for us to understand about the Bible's role in inspiring courage, fellow feeling, and passion for social justice. One can only hope that Noll's monumental achievement in *America's Book* will lead to a sequel focused on those contributions.

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