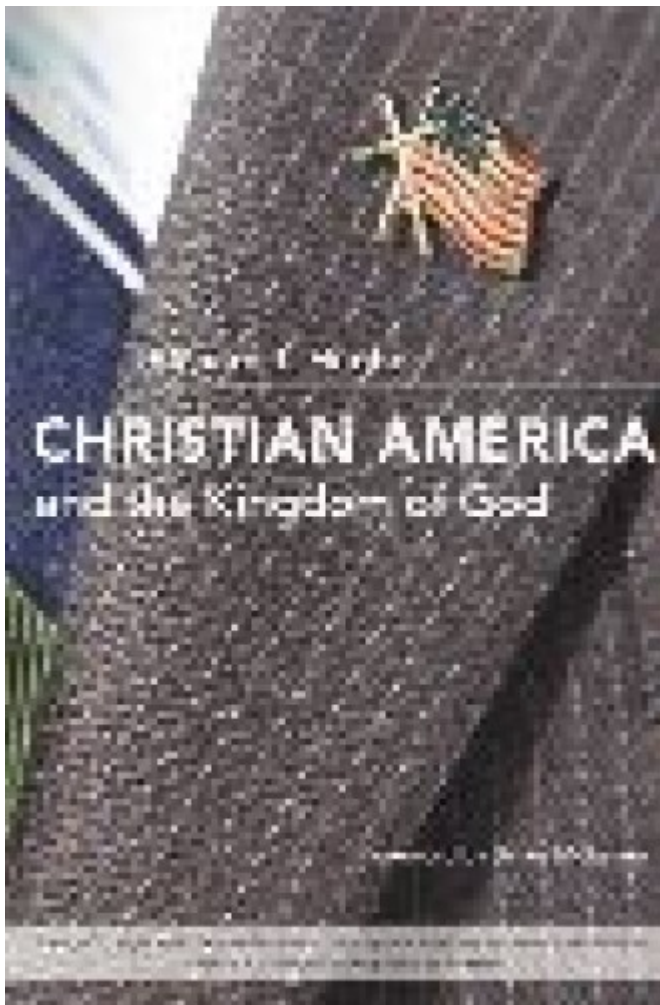


Christian America and the Kindgom of God

reviewed by [Ted A. Smith](#) in the [January 12, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Christian America and the Kindgom of God

Richard T. Hughes

University of Illinois Press

In this book, Richard T. Hughes offers a powerful argument against what he calls the myth of a Christian America. A distinguished professor of religion at Messiah College, Hughes makes a case that ranges across history, biblical studies and theological ethics. He wants to measure the idea of a Christian America against a biblical standard, so he cites passages of scripture, holds the history of the United States next to them and concludes that the idea of a Christian America is neither true nor desirable.

Hughes's appeal to the Bible sets his book apart from the many others that argue against a Christian America. His argument is specifically aimed at Christians who stress the infallible authority of the Bible—exactly the group from which most of the strongest supporters of the idea of a Christian America have come. Hughes's book thus fills a vital niche in contemporary discourse. Endorsements from both Howard Zinn and Richard Mouw begin to tell the story. The book is a matter of sociological interest and, I hope, real political significance.

The book is a model of interdisciplinary scholarship. But a book with this breadth will inevitably frustrate specialists in each field. Biblical scholars might ask for more sustained engagement with scriptural texts and a greater willingness to be surprised by what they say. They would be right to call for attention to a wider spectrum of secondary sources. But such quibbles would not touch Hughes's conclusion. However we understand biblical visions of the reign of God, it is clear that the United States has fallen short of them.

Historians might prefer that Hughes had loosened the hold of the story line that organizes his account. Once upon a time, Hughes's story goes, there was a pristine, primitive church. But then the church came to be in cahoots with Constantine and empire. Over time "ceremonial forms and liturgical rites increasingly displaced the ethical rigor of Jesus and the early church." Hughes is a careful historian, and he consistently notes exceptions to his broader claims. His history of fundamentalism is especially fine. But the history would be stronger with a few more significant exceptions—exceptions that might threaten the main story line. Dorothy Day, for instance, points to some of the ways that "liturgical rites" and "ethical rigor" have fit together for American Christians. John Brown shows that lackeys of empire are not the only ones who have used violence to pursue theocratic visions. And Barack Obama demonstrates how belief systems other than dispensationalist Christianity can lead to a sense of American exceptionalism. Hughes could acknowledge

exceptions like these without compromising the book's conclusion.

Theologians and ethicists might notice that Hughes makes his case against a Christian America in two different ways. First, he “assumes that no nation—whether the United States or any other nation—can possibly measure up to the standards of the Reign of God as we find those standards spelled out in the biblical text.” The U.S. cannot be identified with the reign of God because of the radical transcendence of the reign of God. Second, he insists that the U.S. cannot be identified with the reign of God because of some very specific historical failings: “From Indian removal and extermination to African slavery to racial segregation to state-sanctioned killing in wars for dominance and profit to state-sanctioned torture of enemy combatants—in all these ways and more, Christian America has made a mockery of the Christian religion.”

These two lines of thought run right through the book, though the second gets considerably more play. The two are compatible for Hughes's main purpose—they agree in the negative conclusion that America is not a Christian nation. But they begin to diverge when we consider the remedy each line of thought invites. Insisting that there is no way to bridge the chasm between the reign of God and any state suggests a political ethic that refuses attempts to make the state look a little more like God's reign. But the argument that America has failed to live up to Christian ideals would suggest that Christians should work and witness in ways that nudge the nation toward those ideals, even if they cannot be fully achieved.

Christian America and the Kingdom of God is marked by a persistent, unresolved tension between these two ways of thinking. The book's negative conclusion is clear, effective and important: the U.S. is not the reign of God. But the positive implications are less clear. Just how should Christians conceive of the state? Hughes clearly opposes any sort of Constantinian arrangement, and especially any politics that would use coercive means to impose Christian values. He is warmer to the forms of persuasive power that he identifies with people like Charles Finney. But these reformist impulses are held in check by Hughes's insistence on the radical otherness of the reign of God. He rejects the idea that the state should “embrace as its norm the biblical vision of the Kingdom of God.” There is a tension here, and it does not go away.

But it is not a bad thing. It grows out of the deeply Christian tension between eschatological hope and everyday ethics, between an insistence on the otherness of

God and the call to imitate Jesus in this world. I would worry if either of these poles were lost. Hughes checks both the nihilism of movements that see the state as playing no role in the redeeming work of God and the totalitarianism of states that promise to usher in God's reign. Hughes does not articulate a political theology that can hold eschatology and politics together—that is not his purpose here. But he makes a significant contribution by tracing some of the contours of that need for our times.

Connecting eschatology and politics is a perennial task for Christians. It is one that must be undertaken anew by different Christian traditions in different times and places. The need is especially pressing now for what Hughes calls “a strong, more moderate evangelical subculture” that could be “poised to provide meaningful leadership for American evangelicalism in years to come.” Hughes calls a roll with names like Ron Sider, Jim Wallis and David Gushee, and his book extends the conversation that they—and he—have helped to lead. The book clears the ground of the myth of Christian America, and it sharpens the question of how this movement might come to connect political action with eschatological hope.

Hughes says that it's too soon to know what might come of progressive evangelical stirrings. He's right. But *Christian America and the Kingdom of God* is an important sign of the times. Its passion, clarity and critical piety make it the kind of book that could build a movement.