Protestantism, American style

by W. Clark Gilpin in the December 4, 2002 issue

America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln. By Mark A. Noll. Oxford University Press, 602 pp., $35.00.

The least-understood period in American religious history has been the era of the American Revolution. Most professors, ministers and laypersons could, of course, readily assemble some facts about religion and the Revolution. We might, for instance, comment that founders like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson leaned toward a tolerant deism, favoring religion that cultivated the moral life of citizens but reproving the seeming incivility of doctrinal debate and exclusivism. We stumble, however, when asked to describe the broad currents of religious energy that were moving people and churches during this period. We lack a narrative.

Mark A. Noll, who teaches at Wheaton College, offers just such a narrative by making the Revolutionary era the hinge for a sweeping history of America Protestantism from the 1730s to the Civil War. By identifying the Revolutionary period as a crucial transition he also provides fresh interpretations of what are arguably the two best-understood periods of American religious history: the Great Awakening of the 1740s, with its preeminent preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards, and the antebellum period, with its revivals, benevolent societies and burgeoning denominations. Both take on a new aspect when viewed in the light of the theological and institutional issues that faced the churches of Revolutionary America. Noll's book is a notable achievement in narrative history, and is made even more persuasive by the prodigious research that undergirds each step of the argument as well as by the comparative judgments that situate the American experience in the larger transatlantic world.

Noll describes *America's God* as "a contextual history of Christian theology," and he draws attention to some highly distinctive combinations of theology, moral philosophy and political theory that developed toward the close of the 18th century. For example, despite a long history of antagonism toward republican theory by Christian theologians, who frequently connected republicanism with heresy,

Americans came to believe that there was "a natural fit" between republicanism and Protestantism. With the separation of church and state, this presumed correspondence between politics and theology provided the rationale for an informal Protestant "establishment."

Similarly, whereas Jonathan Edwards, representing Calvinist ideas of election, had opposed the theory of 18th-century Scottish philosophers that every human was endowed with a common moral sense, by the 19th century commonsense philosophy had come to prevail even among theologians who counted themselves followers of Edwards. This philosophy provided Protestant churches with the intellectual justification for founding colleges and seminaries which aimed to promote piety and citizenship simultaneously.

The result of this surprising amalgamation, Noll explains, was the dominant religious ideology of antebellum America: a combination of evangelical Protestantism, republicanism and commonsense popular philosophy that gave the churches a remarkable public voice and influence during an epoch of rapid numerical growth. By the 1830s and '40s, "the synthesis of evangelicalism, republicanism and common sense had become not only the most powerful value system in the nation, but also the most powerful value system defining the nation."

From this high watermark of Protestant public influence, Noll turns his narrative toward its conclusion by describing how, at the moment of seeming success, evangelical Protestantism's integrative intellectual canopy both contributed to and splintered upon the problems of racism and slavery that led to the Civil War.

Any book of this scope and competence will and should raise questions and stimulate further discussion. As I finished reading, I found myself pondering the subtitle, *From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. To what extent is the trajectory suggested by this subtitle actually pursued in the book. *America's God* especially concerns itself with the ideas of Protestant ecclesiastical statesmen, and it organizes these thinkers in terms of their denominational traditions. It is the social history of the ideas of college presidents such as Samuel Johnson and Samuel Stanhope Smith, of professors such as Nathaniel W. Taylor and Moses Stuart, and of organizational geniuses such as Francis Asbury and Lyman Beecher. Although Noll addresses a rich array of doctrines and theological controversies, he focuses his story on the influence of theology on national political life, and vice-versa.

For me, the names Edwards and Lincoln suggest two crucial features of American Protestantism that receive insufficient attention in this book: personal piety, and the religious vitality found outside the churches. Among his many intellectual achievements, Edwards must surely be regarded as one of the great theological interpreters of the interior life. In sermon and treatise he tried to understand "the religious affections," the character of redemption and the spiritual foundations of "true virtue." A history that begins with Edwards, in sum, is a history of piety as well as politics. Students of American religious history who follow Noll's lead will also need to explore the changing ideas and practices of salvation or personal transformation, including the connections of personal religion to denominational development and democratic political life.

Lincoln was a statesman whose strong religious sensibilities eschewed ecclesiastical affiliation. In this he was not alone. Indeed, it is remarkable how many of the Americans active between the 1830s and the 1860s who retain some cultural influence today took their religious concerns outside the churches: the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson, the orator Frederick Douglass, the painter Frederic Edwin Church and the poet Emily Dickinson are examples. Even if we greatly extend this list, it is unlikely to contain figures such as Henry Boynton Smith, who populate Noll's book.

Understanding Smith and his ilk is important to understanding the development of American Protestantism. Because Noll is pursuing the history of what he calls "the American synthesis" he emphasizes Protestantism's cultural work of consolidating and consensus building. But Protestantism was also exerting tremendous centrifugal force in American culture, spinning out dissenters, agitators and innovators whose experimentation has had lasting creative significance. In addition to being an age of synthesis, this was also--as a wonderful old book by Alice Felt Tyler reminds us--the age of *Freedom's Ferment.*

Yet Noll's book is a remarkable achievement. Noll's parting advice is to "read Edwards." My parting advice is to read Noll.