

MARK A. NOLL

God  
and  
Race  
in  
American  
Politics



A Short History

# **God and Race in American Politics**

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American Politics**

A Short History

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To

*David and Bethany*

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# **God and Race in American Politics**

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## *Introduction*

This book offers a simply stated thesis about an immensely complicated history. First, race has always been among the most influential elements in American political history, and in many periods absolutely the most influential. Second, religion has always been crucial for the workings of race in American politics. Together, race and religion make up, not only the nation's deepest and most enduring moral problem, but also its broadest and most enduring political influence.

Yet *how* race and religion have interacted to shape politics has differed dramatically over time and by community. Before the Civil War, religion drove abolitionist assaults upon slavery even as it undergirded influential defenses of slavery in both the North and the South. After that conflict, religion and politics worked very differently for African Americans than for the white majority culture. On the one side, church life opened a limited space for black social organization and intellectual improvement, even though the political effects of that opening would not be evident for another century. On the other side, the political effects were immediate. A Christianity mostly bereft of its antebellum social vitality played a major part in sanctioning systematic white discrimination against African Americans. In turn, the racially defined polity that religious forces helped to create

became a fixed reality of American politics into the 1960s and a precipitate of much political change thereafter. For the recent past, complexity continues. African-American religion helped spark the civil rights movement that left immense political and cultural changes in its wake, but the broader effects of that movement also keyed a politically conservative countermovement inspired by a different kind of religion. The political realignments of the last forty years, which are the most thorough of such realignments in American history, were by no means caused by religion alone, but religious factors have been everywhere evident in their development.

In other words, rather than any specific configuration of race and religion, it has been the general interweaving of race with religion, along with a discernibly religious mode of public argument, that have pervaded the nation's political history. The religious note in American political discourse has been a source of foreign comment from before de Tocqueville to the present.<sup>1</sup> It is rooted in the United States' broadly Calvinist-evangelical heritage that bequeathed a style of public discourse that continues to exert great influence, even for many who have passed far beyond the religious convictions of earlier Americans. An earnest moral concern for how governments should conduct themselves, a compulsion to sermonize about the duties of citizens and the state, and a frequent recourse to Scripture for grounding or garnishing political positions have been consistently present in American history, from nineteenth-century debates over slavery, war, and Reconstruction to recent controversies over civil rights, economic opportunity, right to life, and the ordering of families.

No short history can fully encompass such complicated themes and such complex events, but it does possess the

advantage of portraying different American eras as parts of a continuous story. In addition, a short history may allow for a sharper understanding of how interconnections among politics, race, and religion have developed over time than can be provided by the detailed studies of individual periods and events that I have relied upon so gratefully in putting together this synthesis.



There are, alas, any number of incidents, statements, or situations that could be used to introduce this kind of history—although “alas” is far too simple an interjection for the complexities of the story from Nat Turner to George W. Bush. To treat broad and weighty subjects in short compass means that I will be presenting something more like a cartoon than a real history. But even cartoons can offer a few moments of sharp focus.

One such moment occurred in July 1863, the climactic month of the nation’s most enduringly significant crisis. Earlier in July, crucial victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg turned the military tide of the Civil War in favor of the North; a week later federal officials in New York City began to carry out the draft that Congress had authorized in order to meet the war’s escalating demands for manpower. On Saturday, July 18, Sgt. Robert Simmons, an African American from New York City who had enlisted in the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment of Col. Robert Gould Shaw, was killed during the Union assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina. His death occurred only days after antidraft rioters in New York City, hell-bent on attacking the city’s Negro population, had destroyed Simmons’s family home and lynched his nephew. The riots, as a protest against the

draft in general and especially the provision that allowed men of means to hire a substitute, were fueled by the rage of poor white immigrants and left hundreds of African Americans dead. The day before Robert Simmons's death in far-away South Carolina, Maria Daly, a white diarist, had expressed fears that the New York mob would attack the block in which her home was located, since it was situated near tenements below MacDougal Street, where a band of African Americans had taken refuge on a rooftop. On that rooftop this black contingent was collecting firearms for self-defense and singing psalms for divine protection.<sup>2</sup>

Only a few years later, a conservative Catholic periodical in Munich published a long article by Father Paul Joseph Münz on the subject "Christendom and Slavery," which included full discussion of events in the United States. This journal, the *Historisch-politische Blätter für das katholische Deutschland*, had earlier provided extensive coverage of the War between the States, most of it blasting the North for hypocrisy (since northerners condemned slavery while they profited from the slave trade and the economic fruits of slavery). The journal also defended the Catholic Church as a perennial guardian of the humanity of Africans while attacking Protestants for their inability to agree on what Scripture taught about slavery. Münz recapitulated these criticisms while also asserting unequivocally "the incompatibility of slavery with the basic conception of Christianity." He closed his report with a chilling prophecy: "The North can free the slaves with force, but it cannot civilize them and deliver them from contempt and mistreatment. Here no one can help except the Church, whose main task is precisely this concern."<sup>3</sup> In 1868, when this article was written, what would prove to be the long history of American contempt and mistreatment of former slaves was barely

under way. In fact, it continued until “the church” did do something about it, although it was not the Roman Catholic Church that led the way.

In November 1900 the nation returned President William McKinley to office for a second term in a comfortable Republican victory over his Democratic challenger, William Jennings Bryan. During the campaign, Bryan had distributed a pamphlet by the Negro National Democratic League that attacked U.S. oppression of the Filipino people in the name of those who knew firsthand what it meant to suffer from official American subjugation.<sup>4</sup> Bryan’s support for black causes could not be too aggressive, however, since he needed the electoral votes of the Democratic Solid South, where the process of black disenfranchisement begun shortly after the Civil War was now nearly complete. In that presidential election, voter turnout (as a percentage of a state’s population) ranged as high as 41% in Colorado, while the ratio in most northern and western states averaged between 20% and 33%. (In this period before female suffrage, these figures represented a reasonably high turnout.) But in most of the states of the former Confederacy, with their large black populations, it was another story. African Americans were almost entirely excluded from the polls, and whites had little incentive to vote in the general election, where the outcome was foreordained in favor of Democratic candidates. Thus, the turnout in these states was abysmally low—10% or less of state population in Arkansas, Alabama, and Florida; 5% or less in Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina.<sup>5</sup>

In the immediate wake of the election, the Rev. Francis Grimké presented a notable series of lectures to the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., over which he had presided for more than twenty years. Grimké was a