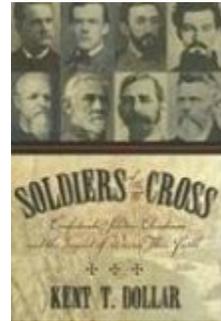


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kent T. Dollar. *Soldiers of the Cross: Soldier-Christians and the Impact of the War on their Faith*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005. 253 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86554-926-5.

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Narrowing the Focus: A More Intimate Look at Confederate Christianity

Religion, in all its many and varied forms, has at times been relegated to a back seat in historical study. Some more stridently secularist historians, such as many of the Marxist school of thought, have neglected the “opiate of the masses” almost entirely. Thankfully, Civil War history has often departed from this paradigm by examining the strongly held religious beliefs of Civil War soldiers in more detail. Kent T. Dollar, an assistant professor of history at Tennessee Tech, provides a solid contribution to this growing literature in his *Soldiers of the Cross*.

There are a number of good books already in print on Civil War religion, such as Steven E. Woodworth’s *While God is Marching On* (2001), Charles Reagan Wilson’s *Baptized in Blood* (1980), and Randall Miller, Harry Stout, and Wilson’s essay compilation *Religion and the American Civil War* (1998). Dollar tries to give his readers something different. Rather than paint with broad sweeping strokes that will necessarily obscure the individual details of his subjects’ lives, he picks nine confederates and subjects their religious lives to more intense scrutiny. In doing so, he aims to show how the war affected the men’s faith, rather than find how their faith may have influenced the war. He discovers that rather than cause a crisis, the war actually deepened their faith commitment, and this deepening was not simply a temporary reaction to the threat of immediate death. It lasted for the rest of their lives and led them to become active members of their respective churches after the war had ended. He also shows that dedicated Christians in the early war days managed to maintain their habits and beliefs in the midst of chaos and immorality of camp life.

The result depicts the men as intense believers, though still human.

There are, of course, a number of difficulties that could be raised with Dollar’s approach, the chief of which is how to assure that these men were not simply an unsung minority. Why should these nine men be more representative of the thousands of Confederate soldiers than nine mediocre believers whose faith was injured? To force this legitimate question too far would be an injustice to Dollar’s book, however. First, he does a good job of explaining how and why he came to pick these men in particular. Next, he himself is also acutely aware of the inherent weakness of his approach and is careful not to push his contentions too far. This is a new slant, and he intends it to be a starting point for further investigations, not the final end to all things religious in the Civil War. Finally, to criticize the book too harshly on this point could easily amount to the charge that Dollar did not write a different book. His goal was not to amass a broad sampling of statistical evidence; he wanted to introduce readers to the personal details of his subjects’ religious experiences. As he himself notes, the two approaches are difficult to harmonize at best, and mutually exclusive at worst. He therefore leaves the large-scale examinations to others, like Woodworth and Wilson.

What results is an invigorating look into the lives of nine real people. Dollar succeeds in making the historical actors real and personal, and in doing so brings them off the statistician’s spreadsheet and into vibrant life for his readers. His decision to examine both the pre- and

postwar experiences of his subjects gives good context and draws out the war's long-term implications for their life and faith. Dollar's writing style is scholarly and yet accessible, giving the book a broad appeal to enthusiasts and serious researchers alike. The book's modest length and vivid depictions would make it useful in a classroom setting, where it could reach the average impatient col-

lege student more effectively than some of the more ponderous tomes available on the topic.

Over all, Dollar provides a solid, worthwhile book that can work well standing alone or in conjunction with other works on the same subject. He opens new possibilities for the research of Civil War religion.

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