H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Nicholls. *God and Government in an "Age Of Reason".* New York and London: Routledge, 1995. xi + 278 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-01173-0.

Reviewed by William C. Barnhart (SUNY at Stony Brook)
Published on H-Pol (February, 1998)

This book is about the shared borrowing of language and images in religious and political discourse. It is a companion volume to Nicholls' previously published *Deity and Domination: Images of God and the State in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Routledge, 1989, 1994), and a forthcoming volume on the seventeenth century. In this work, the "Age of Reason" constitutes the period between the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to the Reform Bill of 1832.

Nicholls maintains that in the eighteenth century there was a transformation in the image of God, from a monarchical figure to an administrator of a great machine which runs according to pre-determined laws. This transformation reflected broader political changes characterized by the decline of absolutism and the rise of constitutional thought. Utilizing a wide array of published sermons and pamphlets, Nicholls moves comfortably between the realms of history, theology and political philosophy, and in the end produces a convincing synthesis.

British thinkers receive top billing in this work and Nicholls has assembled a wide variety of representative figures, including Thomas Malthus, Adam Smith, Joseph Priestly, Samuel Clarke and Isaac Newton. Indeed, Newton figures heavily in this work. His idea of an ordered cosmos with occasional divine intervention sets the tone for many of the book's chapters which, to varying degrees, treat writers who either conform or deviate from Newton's paradigm. For example, in a provocative chapter entitled "God and the Market," Nicholls discusses the importance of the Newtonian paradigm for "ecclesiastical economists" such as Thomas Malthus and Thomas Chalmers. Chalmers' political economy was based on the idea that God was behind the harmony of self interests described by Adam Smith. Just as God reveals himself only occasionally in the natural order, civil governments intervened in societal and economic affairs only as a last resort.

Nicholls moves beyond Britain to discuss revolutionary politics and constitutional government in France. He deviates from traditional views which see the French Revolution as an exercise in secularism. Robespierre's religious beliefs and his use of religious imagery, according to Nicholls, were at odds with the deism popular among some intellectuals of his day. Robespierre helped to forge a cult of the supreme being who, like a great architect, gave order to the universe and ensured that civil societies operated according to a harmony of self interests. Nicholls argues that Robespierre's God was not the totally removed God of the deists, but the supreme being of the Newtonian tradition who sometimes intervened in human affairs.

Nicholls also devotes a chapter to the emergence of constitutionalism in America following the War of Independence. He maintains that American views on constitutionalism and political order were influenced by contemporary ideas about God's relationship to the universe: state constitutions, like the universe, operated according to rational laws. This chapter makes an interesting contribution to the recent historiography which stresses the transatlantic context of early American religious development. It also supplements writings which have focused on millennial themes during the American Revolution (the works of Mark Noll and Nathan Hatch come to mind here).

David Nicholls has succeeded in producing a scholarly monograph which proves again that intellectual, political, and religious history are not mutually exclusive areas of study, and its interdisciplinary approach is the book's greatest strength. Much like David Bebbington's *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London, 1989), it sheds new light on the relationship between religious thought and Enlightenment ideas. Historians, this reviewer among them, will anxiously await Nicholls' next volume on the seventeenth century to get a more complete understanding of the interchangeable dimensions of religious and political discourse.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This

work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

[The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <renlex@csd.uwm.edu>]

********** H-NET BOOK REVIEW Published by H-Pol@h-net.msu.edu (February, 1998)

William E. Pemberton. *Exit With Honor: The Life and Presidency of Ronald Reagan.* Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997. xv + 295 pp.

Illustrations, bibliographical references, and index. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-7656-0095-1; $18.95 (paper), ISBN 0-7656-0096-X.

Reviewed for H-Pol by Mary C. Brennan, Southwest Texas State University

According to William E. Pemberton in *Exit With Honor: The Life and Presidency of Ronald Reagan*, Reagan was a man of many contradictions. A passive administrator who delegated almost all of his responsibilities to his subordinates, Reagan still set the tone which guided the administration. A fervent anti-communist who dedicated himself to building Fortress America, he also hated nuclear weapons and willingly promised to scrap them all when the opportunity presented itself. A conservative who won office by campaigning against big government and the social-welfare state, Reagan increased the federal bureaucracy and eliminated less of the New Deal framework than he anticipated or liberals claimed. The contradictory tradition continued even after he left office as historians battled over his place in history.

Pemberton offers an insightful, if not entirely satisfying, portrait of Reagan. The author does an excellent job of analyzing some of the Reagan's characteristics that confounded both critics and supporters. Pemberton's chapters on Reagan's youth and early career as well as his discussion of his transformation into conservative icon are well argued and helpful. Similarly, the author's step-by-step chronology of the events surrounding the Iran-contra scandal provide clear explanations of a very complex situation. Students, non-specialists and the general public would find it very helpful. Pemberton's conclusion manages to bring together much of the information from the book, but raises a number of issues which he doesn't adequately clarify.

Pemberton uses Reagan's early years to explain some of the contradictions which confused friends and foes during his careers. The author begins by trying to separate the myth from the reality of Reagan's life. Drawing on earlier biographies and memoirs, Pemberton briefly discusses Reagan's childhood, his father's alcoholism and his mother's influence. This combination of factors led to an adult with an amazing ability to shape his own version of reality, to detach himself emotionally from people while appearing to be friendly and open, and with a profound gift at story-telling. In addition, he assumed his parents' Midwestern, populist values which he learned to translate into simple stories that entertained and educated. Honing his skills first in radio and then in Hollywood prepared Reagan well for a political career when circumstances in the country shifted in the 1960s.

Pemberton's chapter analyzing Reagan's growth from an apparently liberal background into a conservative politician is very well done. Although he initially chastises scholars for ignoring conservatism during this period (a fact his own endnotes and bibliography disproves), he goes on to synthesize current historiography very effectively. In the process, he tracks an almost step-by-step trail leading the reader through the shifting political realignments of the second half of the twentieth century. Pemberton shows Reagan's appeal to a white middle and working class constituency threatened by the rapidity of change and declining economic conditions. Reagan's Midwestern background and values combined with his communications skills made him the perfect candidate to voice the concerns of this growing body of disgruntled citizens.

Pemberton's treatment of Reagan's years in Sacramento and Washington, while not necessarily divulging new information, succeeds in revealing the complexity behind Reagan's legendary simplicity. From his first elected office, Reagan took a hands-off approach to government. The values and goals he had been preaching since his days as president of the Screen Actors' Guild set the parameters of his administration; he left the details, including most of the day-to-day operations, in the hands of his subordinates. Pemberton is quick to point out the flaws in this management style. As the author remarks repeatedly, Reagan aides were frequently "reduced to reading body language" to learn what their boss wanted them to do about most issues. In many instances, reading Reagan wasn't that difficult and his most valuable aides–Meese, Baker, and Deaver–were remarkably good at understanding what the president really meant to accomplish.

The style collapsed, however, when Reagan relied on less capable men or refused to follow the advice of his most trusted associates. The Iran-contra scandal resulted from just such circumstances. Reagan ignored the advice of two of his most loyal and trustworthy aides,

George Schultz and Caspar Weinberger, who told him point blank not to deal with the Iranian arms traders, and, caught up in his own version of the reality of the hostage situation in the Middle East, blundered into a disaster. Although the president's advisors ably shifted the focus to the changing relationship with the Soviets, even the "Teflon" president got scratched up.

Still, despite the dissatisfaction of conservatives with their unfulfilled agenda, the outrage of liberals at the treatment of the poor and minorities, and the confusion of the public with the scandal, Reagan left office a popular man who left a legacy his political successors could not ignore. In addition to an enormous debt and an unstable situation in the Middle East and the Soviet republics, Bush, Clinton and their successors faced and will face a mobilized, and experienced, conservative movement and a confused, cynical electorate.

Pemberton spends his conclusion "evaluating Reagan." He discusses briefly Reagan's post-presidential career, including the question of when Alzheimer's disease struck the president. Pemberton also analyzes the way historians, scholars and commentators have evaluated Reagan. Trying to be objective, Pemberton includes information from both supporters and critics. Although this might be a noble idea, the result is slightly confusing as the reader attempts to decipher exactly what conclusions the author is making. Pemberton appears to say in the end that Reagan accomplished more and destroyed less than his critics will allow. Reagan shifted the focus of the American people and helped them believe in the American dream again, even though they realized, in a way Reagan did not, that it was an illusion.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

[The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <renlex@csd.uwm.edu>]

END

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: William C. Barnhart. Review of Nicholls, David, *God and Government in an "Age Of Reason"*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1677

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.