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Daniel W. Stowell. *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863-1877.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Viii + 278 pp. $64.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-510194-2.

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Reconstruction: The Unfinished Story of a Revolution

At the 1998 meeting of the Southern Historical Association, a distinguished panel of historians considered Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* on the tenth anniversary of its publication. Responding to commentator Ivar Bernstein's charge that his book ignored religion, Foner replied that while religion was a critical part of mid-nineteenth-century American life–Democrat and Republican, Yank and Reb–he did not think that serious attention to the subject would alter the story in his book.[1]

Daniel W. Stowell's *Rebuilding Zion* was 'Exhibit A' in Bernstein's case against Foner. The first contemporary study devoted entirely to religion in this troubled period in the South, Stowell's careful institutional history of Protestant churches does not in the end compel this reader to disagree with Foner. But this book does suggest that a mature scholarship of religion for this period-one built of social, cultural, political, and theological history on Stowell's institutional foundation-can recast our understanding of this turbulent era.

"Religious reconstruction" Stowell writes, was "the process by which southern and northern, black and white Christians rebuilt the spiritual life of the South" after the war (p. 7). He tells a straightforward tale of three groups-white northern Christians, white southern Christians, and black Christians, north and south. Each of these groups (Stowell equates "Christian" with "evangelical") interpreted the war differently as God's providence, and it was the "competition among these three visions that determined the shape of religious reconstruction in the South" (p. 7).

Not surprisingly, white southerners viewed defeat as God's chastening of his beloved children, while white northerners viewed it as God's final judgment on slavery. Black people, northern and southern, agreed that the South's defeat marked God's judgment, but they understandably focused on it as a providential deliverance from slavery. The process of religious reconstruction thus entailed three different tasks: white southerners defiantly rebuilt denominations dedicated to sectionalism, while white northerners undertook "mission" work in the South in the quixotic hope that former Confederates would see the error of their ways. African-Americans, north and south, meanwhile achieved stunning success in building their own churches and denominations across the South.

Stowell has written a solid history of religious institutions from religious sources that can stand alone. But if religious history is to challenge the literature of American history, it must engage it. The institutional story that Stowell pursues is most easily plotted against the "public" political and economic story that has dominated histories of Reconstruction until very recently. [2] In the end, Stowell finds that the contours of religious reconstruction conformed to those set out in post-revisionist studies. And as post-revisionists declared the failure of political and economic reform, Stowell declares that religious reconstruction failed. It did so, he argues, because "evangelicals did not forge bonds of gender, class, or denomination that transcended the cleavages of race and region" (p. 8).

This assessment deserves careful analysis. Stowell defines "religious reconstruction" as a process of rebuilding southern "spiritual life." Yet he argues that its failure can be measured in institutional terms: the antebellum denominational schisms prevailed. But by whose standards did religious reconstruction fail? Surely not by those of African-Americans, whose churches and denominations could hardly be judged an inferior alternative to integrated ones. White southerners, meanwhile, disdained the very idea of reunion with their northern "brethren." Moreover, what would the country have gained from united white Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists? Stowell implies that denominational unity could somehow have blunted sectionalism and perhaps even race prejudice. Yet even northern denomina-

tions were eager to segregate. Here Stowell runs square into the dilemma that all historians of Reconstruction–Dunning school, revisionists, and post-revisionists–have faced: how do we decide what these people were capable of? More crassly, what shall we blame them for?- How does one read this era without retreating into some crude determinism that concedes that political, social, and religious equality across racial lines, on any terms, was doomed in 1865? By terming religious reconstruction a failure, Stowell implies that there may have been a moment of unfulfilled possibility in which northerners and southerners could have worked together in biracial churches, but that is not clear.

More troubling, however is the suspicion that religious reconstruction simply did not matter. Stowell asserts that "religious reconstruction profoundly affected the lives of individual Christians," (p. 184), but it appeared to have most profoundly affected those who led the institutional churches. And why do all of these church assemblies and associations matter, apart from their obvious relevance to an ambitious clergy partial to bureaucracy? Stowell valiantly weaves several individuals into his story of these assemblies, but in the end, they get lost. By contrast, Foner's story is compelling because he made his readers care deeply about his protagonists-former slaves and free blacks. Stowell's protagonists are denominational bureaucracies, and here he encounters the perennial problem of denominational history: the passionate and persistent people devoted to building religious institutions are often muffled, if not choked off completely, by the lifeless pens of recording secretaries.

Perhaps Foner was right, then: Reconstruction was a secular event; politics was cause, religion was effect. Even Stowell appears to grant this at one point, noting that sectional fervor determined the failure of denominational reunions north and south (p. 161).

Elsewhere in his book, however, Stowell offers some pithy evidence to the contrary. Most compelling are the voices of people across the country who repeatedly declared that religion shaped politics. In the fall of 1865, the *New York Times* impatiently awaited the Northern churches to declare their policy towards the South, "for its political as well as its religious" consequences. No "political scheme or policy for sectional concord can prosper" without peace between the churches, the *Times* explained. (pp. 53-4). "The Negro votes the Bible," AME minister and editor Benjamin Tanner declared in 1870 (p. 150). People on all sides seasoned their political speech with religious metaphors, most famously in southern conservatives' insistence that the end of Republican rule be called "Redemption." And what of the starkly political intent of northern "missionaries" to a heavily Christian south, whose "mission" was to convert baptized men and women to right denominational policy, which they declared to be "pure religion"? All of this suggests that the tangled relation between antebellum religion and politics explored by Richard Carwardine continued through the Civil War and beyond.[3]

Equally insistent were those who declared that politics had no place in either pew or pulpit, that a pure religion refused to stain itself with partisanship. Many of these were white southerners, though not all: the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, for example, declared that religion should be free of any political motives and was blasted by other black clergymen for doing so. All three of the groups Stowell examines repeatedly staked an exclusive claim to "pure religion," making it one of the most politically loaded terms of the day. A Unionist Methodist pastor and editor declared his allegiance to religious patriotism and his disdain for politics in the pulpit in the same breath (p. 158). Even more intriguing were declarations from politicians themselves. As Frederick Bode has demonstrated in North Carolina, southern politicians often insisted that pure religion had no part in politics precisely because they did not want preachers telling them what to do. And silence–most famously the notorious silence, which Stowell reaffirms, of the public church on racial violence–is manifestly political. If historians have long recognized that southern denials and southern silences were overtly political, they have not fully investigated their meaning.[4]

In *Rebuilding Zion*, Daniel Stowell has written the first of what one hopes will be many fine studies on this subject. Scholars have long taken for granted the agency of religion in the Second Reconstruction; it is time that they carefully considered its place in the first.

Notes:

[1]. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988).

[2]. Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Peter W. Bardaglio, Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

[3]. Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

[4]. Frederick A. Bode, *Protestantism and the New South: North Carolina Baptists and Methodists in Politi-*

cal Crisis (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975).

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