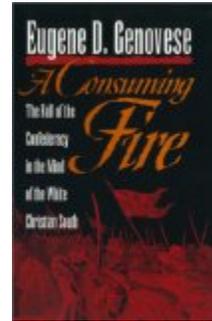


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Eugene Genovese. *A Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the White Christian South*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998. xvi + 180 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2046-5.

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Genovese's Genuflections

Eugene Genovese is one of the foremost twentieth-century American historians. Both scholars and schoolchildren fashion their understandings of antebellum southern slavery, whether they know it or not, from his seminal *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World The Slaves Made*. In over thirty other books, Genovese has dissected the South and its penetration by the global economy. On or about 1995, Professor Genovese converted and exchanged Marxism for Catholicism. His subsequent writings, often jeremiads, reflect this *volte face*.

A Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the White Christian South is Genovese's most recent meditation on the demise of the rebelling South. Delivered in the Mercer University Lamar Memorial Lecture series, this important work joins others by various scholars of southern history who have participated in the series. In this work, Genovese contends that "thoughtful southerners writhed over the gap between the realities of slavery and an ideal system of servitude they considered biblically sanctioned" (p. 107). Their anxiety obsessed on festered scabs of the antebellum regime: the religious conversion and education of slaves and the legitimization of the slave family. Ministers such as the Reverend H. N. McTyeire, a "rising star" in South Carolina Methodism, wrestled with Exodus 2: 26-27 which warned masters that abused slaves would be freed if injustices persisted. Genovese cites leading divines and planters who were deeply vexed about the inequities and iniquities inherent in their peculiar institution. Many prayed for a resolution of the conflict, so long as it was a "manly res-

olution. And they did go down in fire and blood" (p. 33).

The actual war proved most problematical for southern preachers. A few ministers exulted as the South won the first major battles; but even then, many ecclesiastics tempered bellicosity and urged caution. Increasing battlefield losses and home-front miseries prompted a deepening crisis of faith and a call for a reformation of slavery by religious leaders. Some even countenanced freeing slaves who fought for the Confederacy. As the war ended, southern Christians "struggled to read aright the signs of the times" and "could hardly escape the thought that, once again, a wrathful and inscrutable God had called upon the heathen to punish his disobedient people" (p. 71).

Defeat. A word unknown to nineteenth-century Americans, especially northern secular humanists or scientific racists, but a reality ground deep into the marrow of most southerners after Appomattox. Genovese argues that southern race relations plummeted in the 1890s, as exemplified by Jim Crow laws and brutal lynchings which lasted until World War II because southern preachers capitulated to the market capitalists, scientific racists, and theological liberals. He believes that southern religious leaders abandoned their staunch defense of orthodoxy after the Civil War and accepted, heels dragging, segregation and ideas of black inferiority. "We may well find," he contends, "that the retreat of the postbellum southern divines into that liberalism was organically related to their retreat from a coherent social theory and

worldview" (p. 94). Unlike their previous dedication to amelioration of chattel slavery, they despaired of confronting Jim Crow. Instead of swaying public opinion, as they had nobly attempted before the Civil War; they cowered and followed in the postwar era, which Genovese describes as "one of the many joys of the democratization of the church" (p. 95). Even though he insists that such behavior was inevitable because of the irresistible attraction of capitalism and the ensuing bourgeois social order; he chastises the church for silence and capitulation. "Not a mumbling word" was uttered by southern divines. The consuming apocalypse of Civil War had devoured more than just chattel slavery, it had silenced the prophetic voice of orthodox Christians.

As with any such slim volume, Genovese spurs us to study the subject further. How influential and numerous were these antebellum prelates, admired so by the author, who called for Christian reform of southern slavery? Did they really influence that many southern planters or white yeomenry? Does the author exaggerate their impact and importance? Isn't the South's slippery descent into modernity and theological liberalism more complex than being primarily caused by the orthodox minister's acquiescence after the despair of defeat?

For those of us who hum REM'S "Losing My Religion" a little too gleefully, it is impossible to demarcate "orthodoxy" with the precision and certainty of Genovese. Just how does he speak so surely for "the Lord"? Historically, we are on safer ground when we accuse the author of imposing himself—his thoughts and his arguments—into the nineteenth or early twentieth century. The author, like all good Biblical exegesists, counters scriptural debates from the nineteenth century debate with his own twentieth-century rejoinders. At various times, the author injects Deuteronomy 1:17 (p. 30) or Exodus 21:26-27 (p. 132) to support his contentions. In opposing the scientific racists of the postbellum North and South, Gen-

ovese insists "that any such vision could be reconciled with the Bible must be judged, to say the least, doubtful, and subsequent generations of imperialists who tried scripturally to justify their course plunged into rank bad faith" (p. 91). Just what is rank bad faith? Genovese also creates a fantasy reader who must have known, from his reading of Gibbon, that Muslims were prohibited from separating slave children from their mothers (p. 21). Ironically for such a conservative historian, authorial intrusions put him in the stylistic camp of postmodernists.

Genovese's divines had a superior vision, he believes, to the flawed and degrading chattel slavery of the antebellum world, to the flawed and degrading sharecropping and wage-earning slaves of the Gilded Age, and to the flawed and degrading consumption-slave of the postmodern world. Whether this is historically accurate is debatable; but what seems most laudatory about Genovese is his attempt to try to see the white antebellum South in all its complexity and richness and to reaffirm the importance of religion in the region during the nineteenth century.

In matters of the heart and of the bended knee, Eugene Genovese has decided he is not responsible to his guild, but to his God. His footsteps are, for many, inaccessible. But his passion, analysis, and integrity are, still, exemplary. The next time you despair, which will most likely be the next time you read the newspaper, take solace that Eugene Genovese most likely has three or four good books left to write before he takes leave for that which he has so long yearned: his destination, at long last, to the City of God. Such books will be treasured by those of us who know only the City of Man.

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