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John R. McKivigan, Mitchell Snay, eds. *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998. viii + 391 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2076-2; $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1972-8.

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Slavery, according to an antebellum southern Presbyterian newsletter, was "the most blessed and beautiful form of social government known; the only one that solves the problem, how rich and poor may dwell together; a beneficent patriarchate" (18). To radical abolitionist Stephen S. Foster, such sentiments belonged to "apologists and supporters of the most atrocious system of oppression and wrong, beneath which humanity has ever groaned." The southern clergymen responsible for such ravings sought only to "perpetuat[e] slavery for the purpose of supplying themselves with concubines from among its hapless victims" (3). Religious figures north and south were central figures in the antebellum debates over slavery that often descended into most unchristian mudslinging. The participants in those debates frequently wondered how they could be reading the same Bible as the misguided wretches on the other side, and the paradox has not been lost on modern historians. In this collection, editors McKivigan and Snay bring together essays that explore the divergence of antebellum religious thought while demonstrating how religious discourses shaped the divisive debate over slavery that was so instrumental in bringing on the Civil War.

As the volume's thirteen essays make clear, religious influence on that debate involved far more than a formulaic insistence on divine sanction for the institution by proslavery advocates or on abolitionists' equally strong belief that slavery blasphemed God–though millions of Americans held one or the other position. Rather, it was the permutations of those positions, the search for–and usually failure to find–points of reconciliation, and the variety of ways in which religion was applied to sectionalist and nationalist ideologies, that make the story interesting and more complicated. In this regard, the collection amounts to an impressive look at the intersection of religion, culture, and politics in the antebellum period.

In their succinct introduction, the editor review the divergent theological impulses behind proslavery, antislavery, and a range of moderate positions, as well as the historiographic debates that have shaped our understanding of them. They describe a religious and political climate of spiraling suspicions and intemperate condemnation directed by clerics on both sides toward the other, and the efforts of conciliators to maintain dialogue. McKivigan and Snay divide the essays into four groups to reflect these themes.

Part One, "Religion and the Origins of the Slavery Debate," locates the solidifying of both proslavery and antislavery positions in attempts by northern and southern churches to come to grips with the rhetoric of equality and freedom generated by the American Revolution. In Virginia, Douglas Ambrose writes, ministers helped develop the religious foundations of a paternalist social order countering egalitarianism and subordinating enslaved African Americans. Robert Forbes finds that revolutionary-era religious antislavery thought found reinforcement from Scottish Common Sense philosophy, which not only condemned slavery but also championed a strong state. In the American political arena, this combination produced a core of religious Federalists inimical to the slaveholders' interests. In turn, the slaveholders developed their own antithetical stance that blended religious proslavery ideology with states-rights' republicanism.

Part Two, "Conflict Within the Ranks," and Part Three, "The Center Does Not Hold: Individuals, Institutions, and Slavery," reflect one thematic core of the book, comprising case studies of attempts by both northern and southern churches to find "middle-ground" positions, and the difficulty of maintaining them under social and political pressure. In Georgia, according to Christopher Owen, while white Methodists believed slavery to be compatible with Christianity, they shied away from a strong endorsement of the institution, instead adopting a politically expedient "position of theoretical neutrality" on the issue that allowed them to "win converts in the big house, the slave quarters, and the yeoman's cabin alike" (126). Meanwhile, argues Laura Mitchell,

northern religious sentiment over slavery was so divided that most northerners actually acquiesced to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. While many clerics condemned the act as unchristian, most urged compliance to it out of a sense of commitment to a larger national Christian (and white) community undergirding the Constitution. Regarding southern slaveholders as neighbors whose rights were bound to be respected, these ministers would also "expect southerners to seek redress to their complaints through the same divinely inspired document, not by violence or secession" (159).

Elizabeth Varon's study of white female proponents of African colonization demonstrates the fragility of maintaining centrist religious positions as black resistance to slavery increased. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the colonization movement had formed an attractive outlet for Christian conversion efforts among a "benevolent consensus" of northern and southern evangelicals, including a strong cadre of white women. In the wake of Nat Turner, however, as white northern women lent their voices to the intensifying abolitionist movement, the "benevolent consensus on slavery broke down," and with it the "fragile national consensus on the meaning of evangelical womanhood" (190). Two case studies by Deborah Van Broekhoven and Hugh Davis of northern clergymen, Francis Wayland and Hugh Davis, respectively, explore the theology and practice of moderate antislaveryism. Both men pursued a conciliatory approach toward their proslavery southern counterparts by eschewing moral condemnation and attempting to mediate between the growing militancy on either side of the issue.

Whereas the middle sections of the book focus on attempts to steer a moderate course in the slavery debate, Part Four, "Breaking Bonds: The Denominational Schisms," examines links between slavery, sectionalism, and the fracturing of church denominations in the 1830s and 1840s. In the Western Reserve of Ohio, according to Chris Padgett, the slavery debate undermined the Plan of Union, which since the early nineteenth century had "served as the mechanism for interdenominational missionary cooperation throughout the northern and western United States (250)." The national Presbyterian split in 1837 spurred debate between radical and moderate factions of Presbyterians and Congregationalists in the Western Reserve and ultimately led to interdenominational rupture in this largely antislavery northern region. Randy Sparks uses Mississippi as a test case to argue that the schisms of 1844 and 1845 in the Baptist and Methodist churches only partly reflected the national debate over slavery. Equally importantly, the debate became a lightning rod for an internal struggle between what Sparks terms traditionalists and modernists in Mississippi in both the Baptist and Methodist churches as they moved from sect to full denomination. In the process, the more vigorous, "modernist" biblical defense of slavery carried the day, presaging the national schism. Beth Barton Schweiger uses the example of Virginia to explore the consequences of national religious schism in internal church organization and structure.

In the early nineteenth century, she argues, denominational affairs largely centered around local concerns. Yet as the slavery debate heated up, "progressive" pastors sought to promote a larger vision of active Christian benevolence and mission outreach in connection with biblical proslaveryism. As they became spokesmen for denominations and causes rather than for local congregations, the pastors' relationship with their own flocks became more distanced.

Edward R. Crowther traces the increasing connection between southern evangelicals and politics after the religious schisms of the mid-1840s. For many clerics the identification of southern nationalism with proslavery entailed an increasingly shrill denunciation of abolitionist deviltry and an inability to hear the voices of more moderate religious northerners. "By the end of the 1850s, southern evangelicals had chosen their enemies. Anyone or anything that denied their conception of God or their interpretation of the Bible they considered anathema and resisted it" (337). By 1860, such intransigence made evangelical support for secession an easy call. And finally, John McKivigan suggests that the denominational schism of the 1840s stemmed from proslavery southerners' disputes not with radical abolitionists but with northern antislavery moderates who feared the defection of abolitionists from the churches. Thus, immediate abolitionism in the north gained momentum despite northern churches, not because of them. The great majority of northern clerics were tepidly antislavery at best, a moral inadequacy that McKivigan sees as an ominous harbinger of the churches' readiness to abandon radical Reconstruction.

Together, these essays demonstrate the difficulty of slotting the antebellum "northern" and "southern" churches' positions on slavery into readily identifiable categories. Disputes, schisms, and bitter denunciations there were–but attempts at conciliation and negotiation were never completely snuffed either. Yet when "modernism" and "progressivism" in white southern evangelical religion came to signify an aggressive proslavery stance connected more explicitly with southern na-

tionalism, as Sparks and Schweiger argue, such fundamental shifts were embedded not only in the argument over slavery but in shifting cultural fault lines that seem to have diminished chances for a religious middle ground. Though the essays themselves point in often starkly contradictory directions that may well provide the basis for further comparative study (how to reconcile Owen's neutral Georgians with Crowther's militants or Sparks's modernists?) they broadly fall into two major interpretive categories. One is a timidly antislavery white religious North, the other an increasingly militant, proslavery, white religious South. A collection such as this cannot attempt to strive for a synthetic sectional comparison of the importance of religion in the slavery debate, but one comes away from the essays with a greater sense of religion's role in the South in crystallizing and articulating a position on slavery. We would like to know more about the small but vocal core of militant religious northerners–did they play a role disproportionate to their numbers in generating sectional strife, or did proslavery southerners vastly overestimate their influence? If radical abolitionism conducted its activities largely without the support of the churches, can we draw inferences about the greater relative secularization of northern society? And what about African-American religious involvement in the debate? The editors admit that the collection does not discuss this aspect, but it seems an odd omission, given the importance of free black churches in mobilizing antislavery in the north, and the assumption that slave religion was by nature antislavery. Throughout the anthology, the words "southern" and "northern" are used as synonyms for white southerners and northerners.

Nonetheless, *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery* is representative of sophisticated new research on the influence of multiple religious discourses in shaping antebellum southern culture and points toward intriguing possibilities for pursuing the questions raised by the contributors.

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