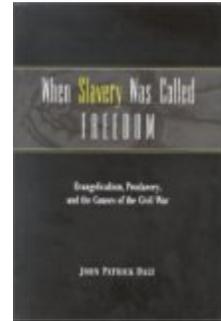


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John Patrick Daly. *When Slavery Was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002. 207 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2241-0; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8131-9093-8.

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The Enduring Legacy of Southern Religion

Seeking answers to questions about southern distinctiveness and the roots of the American Civil War, historians in recent years have increasingly investigated antebellum religion. In a contemporary context, these queries reflect current interest in the permeable lines between religion, politics, and popular culture. Likewise, in times of war, leaders continue to invoke religion—or at least religious imagery—to justify a cause. In *When Slavery Was Called Freedom*, John Patrick Daly traces the seeds of the Civil War to the watershed year of 1831. The result is a fascinating new perspective on religion in the Old South and the causes of America's fratricidal conflict.

Historians have long accepted that 1831 was a pivotal year in American history. Nat Turner's Rebellion and the birth of radical abolitionism in the form of William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* ushered in the antebellum era. Yet also coalescing on this date were two powerful developments that, in Daly's estimation, ultimately had greater impact on the country's future: pervasive evangelicalism and a maturing southern slave economy. While the threat of abolitionism and slave uprisings gave southerners a sense of urgency, he believes that an evangelical defense of the peculiar institution would have developed anyway. In other words, white southerners would have justified the success of their cash crop economy regardless of any opposition to it. The religious justification for slavery in turn created fault-lines in America's theological and intellectual community. As the nation divided along political and economic issues in the 1840s and 1850s, the southern evangelical definition of liberty

sanctified secession and, later, war. Despite the slavery debate, however, antebellum evangelicalism was remarkably similar in the North and the South.

The argument that an evangelical defense of slavery contributed to the antebellum sectional rift is not new. Yet the assertion that American evangelicalism enjoyed near homogeneity from the 1830s to the 1860s strikes a new chord in the historiography. Previous studies, from such scholars as Mitchel Snay and C. C. Goen, emphasized the schisms of national churches to reveal a wide chasm between northern and southern religion. Daly, on the other hand, focuses on intellectual and religious thought shared by abolitionists, free-soil advocates and slaveholders alike. Surprisingly, a dedication to freedom was a pillar in both northern and southern traditions. The slaveholding South never abandoned its commitment to liberty, but the region's evangelicals helped fashion an alternative explanation of the principle in order to remain in harmony with the national ethos. Southern clergy resolved the paradox of slavery and freedom by defining the latter as a form of self-restraint and self-control. Therefore, everyone, according to this definition—including women, blacks (free and slave), and poor whites—could obtain freedom.

Though reaching different conclusions about slavery, northern and southern evangelicals embraced progress and scientific economic rationales. Southerners welcomed the technological advent of steam power, for example, which they acknowledged as being greatly re-

sponsible for the economic success of slaveholders and their region's economy. Far from agrarian reactionaries, evangelicals in the Old South considered themselves to be embracing modernity. As economic destinies began to diverge, southern evangelicals believed that Providence would continue to smile on slavery. Contrarily, but with near identical logic, northerners believed that God was on their side. Everyone could not be right.

Daly's loose definition of evangelicalism as a "sweeping cultural movement that celebrated individualism and moral self-discipline" allowed him to cast a wide net in his research (p. 2). The writings of pro-slavery churchmen such as the Episcopal Bishop Stephen Elliott, usually considered non-evangelical, are therefore included. The bulk of sources are published sermons rather than manuscripts. Daly also skillfully utilizes church periodicals and books written by the antebellum clergy. Among others, the writings of divines James Henley Thornwell, Calvin Henderson Wiley, Josiah Priest, and Frederick Ross are featured. Since the subject matter concerns public discourse, the methodology makes sense. One may wonder, however, if Daly's arguments will hold up to the closer scrutiny of detailed state or local studies. Religious distinctions between town and country, the differing the-

ology between the Lower South and the Border States, and many other nuances are left unexplored. Moreover, studies that do incorporate unpublished diaries and letters may find that the ideas of religious leaders do not reflect the mentality of the laity. Despite these criticisms, scholars should acknowledge the many avenues of exploration that this book has opened.

When Slavery was Called Freedom is an important and welcome contribution to antebellum and Civil War historiography. Furthermore, its publication is timely as it coincides with the continued "nationalization of the South and southernization of the nation" in our own era (p. 156). According to Daly, this current process transpires with relative ease because mores were so similar between the North and South before and during the Civil War. The claim is alarming because it leads to the assertion that "the moral rhetoric now employed to justify [current inequities] was developed in the antebellum slavery debate" (p. 157). Whether or not America's continued acceptance of disproportionate wealth is indeed traceable to proslavery logic—as Daly contends—should provide historians plenty of fodder for a prolonged and rich discussion.

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