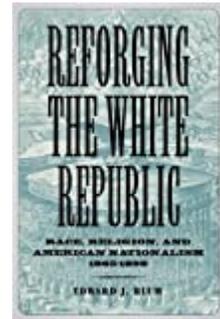




**Edward J. Blum.** *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. x + 356 pp. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3052-0.



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## **A New National Faith?: Religion and the Retreat from Reconstruction**

On Thanksgiving Day 1860, the eve of the Civil War, Henry Ward Beecher, one of the North's most popular and influential preachers, placed three choices before his congregation: to concede to Southern demands; to "compromise principles"; or to "maintain principles upon just and constitutional grounds," come what may (p. 13). The title of his sermon was "Against a Compromise of Principle," but even Beecher, as Edward Blum shows in this detailed study of the role religion played in the retreat from Reconstruction, compromised in the end. For Beecher, as for other Northern divines and activists, Blum argues, the road to reunion proved paved with good intentions as far as their erstwhile Confederate foes were concerned. But that reunion came at the cost of those ideals that Beecher himself had promulgated so aggressively both before and during the war: liberty, equality and an inclusive civic nationalism that took no account of color but opened the door to full membership in the reconstructed nation for black and white alike. Having previously juxtaposed, with some vigor, the "Freedom and Civilization" of the North against the "Slavery and Barbarism" of the South in his antebellum sermons, once the war had been fought and won, Beecher preached a different message:

forgiveness.[1] In so doing, Blum suggests, Beecher and others like him "endeavored to shift the North's moral imperative away from racial uplift and toward national conciliation" (p. 247). For African Americans, "the joy of the 1860s" soon "turned into the sorrow of the 1890s" in the face of a "national descent into violence, disfranchisement, and hatred," and the emergence of a new, ethnic nationalism "suffused with racism and alienation" (p. 249).

At first glance, the bleak topography of this thesis is very familiar. A great many scholars have traversed the ground between 1865 and the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898 in the process of exploring how the Union was put back together again, and at what cost. Nor is Blum's endpoint on his particular map of the road to reunion essentially different from that identified by, among others, Paul Buck, Nina Silber and Cecilia O'Leary. Blum's work in no sense challenges this historiography of betrayal, of hopes raised and dashed, opportunities glimpsed but unattained, a mirage of equality that faded as northern and southern whites moved closer to that significant handshake across the stonewall

that marked the final cessation of hostilities. This was the ultimate compromise reached between former Union and Confederate foes at the expense of African-American hopes for equality. This historiography appeared to have reached its zenith with the publication, in 2001, of David Blight's magisterial *Race and Reunion* but, argues Blum, in all this scholarship, one element, the crucial element in any study of nineteenth-century America, is missing: religion.[2]

Religion, Blum stresses, was the cornerstone of America's national identity in the nineteenth century, "a primary matrix through which many Americans interpreted, evaluated, and articulated their experiences and ideas" (p. 11), yet these scholars of Reconstruction and beyond, Blum observes, "implicitly assume that religion was not a salient feature of postwar America" (p. 9). Further, and compounding this problem, those studies that have as their focus the construction of "whiteness" in nineteenth-century America have assumed continuity where, Blum suggests, none existed. The "remaking of national whiteness was so successful" he observes, "that it appeared as if it had never been ruptured. The fiction of a monolithic and national whiteness has masked the fact of a fractured and reconfigured whiteness that followed the Civil War" (p. 7). Blum's purpose here is to probe behind that mask. Given that all the pieces of the national jigsaw were in the air in 1865, it is Blum's assertion that by bringing religion into the equation, we can better understand why they arranged themselves in the way they did by 1900. Northern religious spokesmen and women, Blum proposes, "played a critical role in reuniting northern and southern whites, in justifying and nourishing the social and spiritual separation of whites and blacks, and in propelling the United States into global imperialism" (pp. 3-4). By focusing on their understanding of, and ambition for American nationalism, *Reforging the White Republic* aims to provide nothing less than "a completely new perspective on sectional relations and racial ideologies after the Civil War" (p. 8).

Blum's study opens with an image, that of New York artist J.L. Giles's "Reconstruction," an idealized vision of postwar America in which sectional reconciliation and racial harmony went hand in hand, and where the "old pillars of 'Slavery' that upheld the national pavilion were being replaced with new ones of 'Justice,' 'Liberty,' and 'Education'" (p.1). Although northern shock at Lincoln's assassination hampered the sectional reconciliation aspect of the image, Blum shows that it reinforced the racial harmony possibilities inherent in the war's outcome. It encouraged many northerners to shift their

opinions of both Confederates and African Americans, by calling into question "the whiteness of Confederates" while simultaneously "asserting the essential national sameness of southern blacks and northern whites" (p. 11). In the immediate postwar period, Blum suggests, "ideas of racial and national difference sat in a triangular arrangement—with Yankees, Confederates, and African Americans occupying distinct positions. The story of postwar Reconstruction was, in part, the tale of how this triangular racial and sectional structure appeared momentarily and then quickly lapsed again into a white-black binary" (p. 11). Blum identifies three main factors that speeded this return to the "white-black binary," and the rise of the white republic predicated on it: Dwight Lyman Moody's revivals of the 1870s and 1880s, the Yellow Fever outbreak of 1878, and the activities of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Together, he argues, they provided "many of the needed opportunities for northern whites to imagine former Confederates as equal partners in the nation" (p.15).

The integration of these three "case studies" into the overall thesis is assured and sophisticated, and Blum never loses sight of the broader context of the politics of Reconstruction nor the African-American response to this gradual shift away from "civic" toward "ethnic" nationalism. Moody, in particular, took off at the point when Beecher's star was in decline, but he promulgated much the same line in sermons that "promoted a depoliticized and distanced version of the Civil War, with stories in which white soldiers from both sections were considered equally valiant" (p. 123). Moody did not especially support the idea of segregation; he simply did not stand up to those who did, although he preached to black and white audiences alike. When, in 1895, in Texas, Moody finally, and dramatically, sought to tear down the physical barriers separating the black from the white audience it was, as Blum describes it, "a marvellous turn of events"; it was also a case of too little, too late. By refusing "to stand against the tide of racial prejudice and segregation," Moody had helped foment the social and cultural climate that permitted the rise of Jim Crow, and in which *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) appeared a reasonable and logical "solution" to the nation's racial divisions. It was, Blum concludes, the triumph of the "gospel of reconciliation and reunion" over "biblical interpretations of divine judgment and religious activism" (pp. 144-145). The Yellow Fever outbreak in the South in this period, or more specifically the northern response to it, further revealed that concern for southern white welfare had trumped any desire to achieve racial parity. Compassion for the suf-

ferings of the white South did not extend to the African-American victims of the fever. "People of color," Blum shows, "had to contend with both pestilence and prejudice" (p. 172).

By the time that the WCTU enters Blum's picture, its growing tendency to depict "African Americans, immigrants, and Catholics as aliens in the country who endangered the safety of the nation" found a ready audience among a people already contemplating the ramifications of what Rudyard Kipling famously described as "the white man's burden" (p. 200). Blum concludes his study of the reforging of the white republic at the point when that republic was on the verge of another conflict, one that would bring the white North and South together, and usher in a new age of American influence abroad. America was hardly alone in this impulse, however, and although Blum describes Kipling's famous poem as highlighting "the American quest as a religious, racial, and gendered crusade," of course it was not merely descriptive but composed specifically to encourage Americans toward that end (p. 234). As so often in the twentieth century, the New could not fully leave the Old World behind, and as the two moved closer together, the hands across the ocean were not empty, but clutched an agenda hardly unique to the United States. Blum concludes that, at the dawn of the twentieth century, an "ethnic nationalism centered on whiteness had prevailed over the radical civic nationalism of the 1860s" (p. 243). However, the extent to which religion, per se, was the motivating factor in the development of post-Civil War American nationalism could, perhaps, have been probed just a little harder.

Some of the elements that Blum identifies as components of this emergent "ethnic" nationalism after the Civil War quite clearly existed in the antebellum republic, which rather begs the question of the extent to which the "white republic" did suffer a fracture as a result of the war. For example, he observes that some northerners "went so far as to depict Confederates as fundamentally alien from northern whites" in the aftermath of Lincoln's death, but this was so strong a component of northern "civic" nationalism prior to the war that its repetition afterwards seems hardly surprising (p. 27). It is not a simple case of American nationalism occurring in three distinct phases, from antebellum ethnic, via a brief attempt at Civil War civic, toward a reconfigured Reconstruction ethnic variant again. The civic nationalism of the United States has always contained a strong ethnic component but it works both ways; ethnic nationalism in its most extreme form cannot develop because the American ethnic variant also contains a corrective dose of civic precepts,

a challenge to and a break on the complete dominance of any overarching ethnic ideology. As far as nativist, racist and anti-Southern rhetoric was concerned, the Civil War was a distraction from a long-running theme, and the debate took up where it had left off, pretty much as soon as the guns had ceased firing. The difference, postwar, was that the South could no longer be excluded from the nation in rhetorical terms; a way had to be found to incorporate it, and this is where the religious dimension to American nationalism really comes into play.

Blum criticizes scholars, with justification, for too readily removing religion from Reconstruction's history, yet at times he himself is in some danger of removing the longer-term history from American religion. This becomes especially problematic in the context of any discussion of post-Civil War American nationalism. The work on American nationalism has, to date, negotiated the cultural, social, ethnic and racial dimensions of the equation but rather too neatly sidestepped the religious element except in the extensive yet somewhat disjointed historiography that exists on America's "millennial" role, its position as, in Tuveson's phrase, the "redeemer nation" of the world.[3] Perhaps unexpectedly for a study that ends with the United States on the verge of trying to put its role as redemptive exemplar to the test, Blum does not engage with the scholarship on American millennialism and its proponents. A case in point is his presentation of Josiah Strong, whose 1885 work, *Our Country* is simply cited as an example of the Anglo-Saxon mindset at its most extreme, which in some ways it was; however, Strong was operating within the context of a long-standing American evangelical tradition which promulgated "millennialist nationalism" by privileging Union above all. As David Humphreys, former aide to George Washington, asked in 1804, "What but disunion can our bliss destroy?"[4]

Ultimately, Blum argues that "abandoning commitments to racial justice were essential to the remaking of the white republic" (p. 15). Yet it is by no means clear that religious leaders, or their congregations, made such commitments in the context, or with the intention, of establishing a new, more inclusive American nationalism. Their concern for the integrity of the republic, itself derived from the millennialist nationalism they espoused, predisposed them to take their eyes off the prize—a fully civic nationalism for the reconstructed nation—when it was tantalizingly within reach. Once slavery was abolished, the impulse to judge the South not only declined, but seemed wholly inappropriate. It is perhaps in this context that Beecher's "compromise" needs to be exam-

ined if it is to be fully understood. The emphasis on individual conversion and salvation inherent in the evangelical faith did not lend itself easily, perhaps, to the kind of moral activism that American nationalism required once it was clear that the nation itself had been saved. How the postmillennialist mindset played out in the context of the development of post-Civil War American nationalism is perhaps the subject for another study. Certainly Blum's fine and complex work on hitherto unexplored aspects of the reforging of the white republic ought to ensure that such a study is undertaken. By presenting a fresh, albeit troubling and hardly uplifting, perspective on a familiar era in American history, he has certainly provided a more sophisticated, if equally more unsettling, understanding of how Americans threw away their last, best hope for racial equality and a truly civic and inclusive nationalism in the years following the Civil War.

## Notes

[1]. Henry Ward Beecher, "Against a Compromise of Principle" (1860), in *"God Ordained This War": Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830-1865*, ed. David B. Chesebrough (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 73-74, 81.

[2]. Paul Buck, *The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1937); Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[3]. Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968).

[4]. Quoted in Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p.121.

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