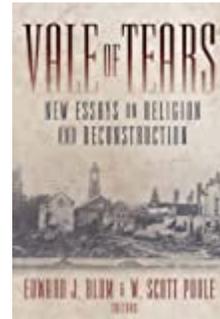




**Edward J. Blum, W. Scott Poole, eds.** *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005. ix + 265 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86554-987-6; \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86554-962-3.



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## Religion and Reconstruction

Those familiar with America's Reconstruction era know well that its political history has been the subject of intensive debate. Its religious history, however, has not received nearly as much scrutiny. The twelve essays in *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction* help rectify this by calling attention to the prominent and varied roles played by religion during this time. The editors also hope to break down some of the "false barricades" between the fields of history, religion, literary criticism, cultural studies, and anthropology (p. 3). At the same time, they want to address Reconstruction and religion from both a regional perspective—the South—and a national context. This is indeed a tall order! The book, though, achieves its goal of highlighting religion's pervasive and significant influence.

While scholars commonly address particular aspects of Reconstruction religion, mainly in essays, less often does one find an entire volume devoted to the topic. Book-length studies include Edward J. Blum's *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898* (2005), Ward McAfee's *Religion, Race, and Reconstruction: The Public School in the Politics of the*

*1870s* (1998), and Victor B. Howard's *Religion and the Radical Republican Movement, 1860-1870* (1990), but these do not present a broad view of the period's religion. *Vale of Tears* helps fill this need. Although not attempting a comprehensive analysis—a collection of essays could hardly achieve such a goal—the book nonetheless effectively demonstrates the need to explore more thoroughly Reconstruction's religious dimensions.

The twelve articles have been grouped into five parts, with the first three essays exploring the relationship between religion, southern violence, and segregation, and the next two focusing on the religious aspects of African Americans' response to white supremacy. Readers will undoubtedly recognize many of the essays' authors. Kimberly R. Kellison argues that white, evangelical South Carolinian males used their traditional roles as protectors of the household to reassert patriarchal control over women and blacks (the latter having been removed from the white household by emancipation). Maintaining the white family's purity helped justify violence against blacks and even influenced attempts by congregations to regulate the morality of their members.

W. Scott Poole, one of the book's editors, next challenges the idea that violence against African Americans gained symbolic power primarily from Christian ideas about Jesus' sacrificial death. Instead, eschatological ideas played at least as much a role as did substitutionary atonement. Apocalyptic language helped legitimate extreme violence by portraying many of the era's struggles in terms of clashes between good and evil. Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr. then points out that the Episcopal Church's Sewanee Conference of 1883 attempted to bring order to southern society not by expelling black Episcopalians from the denomination, but by asserting paternalistic control over them in a manner reminiscent of antebellum white-black relations. The traditional biblical belief in humanity's unity aided these efforts.

In the second section, Paul Harvey calls attention to the way religious discourse molded understandings of Reconstruction and Redemption by both white and black southerners. He also addresses the role played by African American congregations and ministers, such as Henry McNeal Turner and William Jefferson White, in shaping African Americans' responses. The book's other editor, Edward J. Blum, reveals how African Americans understood the practice of racial exclusion in religious terms, which not only gave them comfort, but also provided the language and ideas for active resistance. In short, African Americans argued that the United States would be a truly Christian nation only after racism ceased.

The book's third section uses three essays to probe how religious rhetoric impacted political discourse and moral reform. Mark Wahlgren Summers points to the prominent role African American ministers played in shoring up black support for the Republican Party. While acknowledging that religious language had also supported Confederate nationalism, he argues that Republicans "made more of a show of their religion in the Reconstruction years" (p. 116), partly because religion so resonated with African Americans. Daniel W. Stowell concludes that white southerners appropriated a religious term, "redemption," to describe the political transformation they desired, that is, the end of Reconstruction. This term helped unify a large number of white voters, and encompassed efforts to purge southern society of its sins and to remove Republican political leaders. It also represented the birth of a new southern society, rather than a return to its antebellum predecessor. Gaines M. Foster explains how the South became known as the Bible Belt by connecting this characterization with changing attitudes caused by slavery's demise. Freed from preoccupation with federal intervention over slavery, and even

citing it as precedent, white southerners joined northerners in the national crusade to legislate morality. Viewed by some as a "bulwark of morality," the largely Protestant South took on a Bible-Belt identity long before H. L. Mencken coined the term.

The articles in the fourth section focus on Catholicism during the Civil War and Reconstruction. David T. Gleeson shows that the nation's Catholic Church was not unified, but that most southern Catholics, like most southern Protestants, opposed Radical Reconstruction. He concludes that "the Catholic Church in the South was indeed as much Southern as it was Catholic" (p. 185). Kent A. McConnell examines the Catholic cemetery overlooking Mount Saint Mary's College in Emmitsburg, Maryland, near Gettysburg. As a "landscape of changing hermeneutics" (p. 201), the cemetery reveals how each generation negotiated differently the war's memory within their Catholic identity, with the earliest commemoration of the dead being as Catholics, not Union or Confederate dead.

The final section contains two essays focusing on religion's contribution to the development of Reconstruction cultures. Joan Waugh argues that the death and funeral of Ulysses S. Grant in 1885 reflected a national memory based on reconciliation between the North and South, especially as the South chose not to remember Grant as "the butcher" or the one who enforced "Negro rule" (p. 224). Sectional issues receded in favor of national ones as the South reintegrated itself into the Union. The reinterpretation of the war and the accompanying "loss of memory" came at the expense of African Americans (p. 225). Laura J. Veltman recasts Thomas Dixon as indicative, rather than exceptional, of white American racial and cultural thought. In his writings, Dixon promoted a white supremacist view of America as a Christian nation, ruled by Anglo-Saxons. He argued that the traditional family was threatened by socialists and African Americans, and thus sought to preserve Anglo-Saxon Protestantism.

While each essay stands on its own merit, certain themes commonly appear, although examined from different angles. For example, the altered power and position of whites caused white males to view emancipation as a threat to southern patriarchy (pp. 16-17, 29), Episcopalians to administer the Church paternalistically (pp. 55, 72), white conservatives to view the citizenship privileges exercised by African Americans as overturning a divinely ordained hierarchy (pp. 89-90), and white southerners to fear and resist what they believed was political and cultural slavery enforced by the North (p. 146). Also

of interest is how northerners and southerners, whites and African Americans, and Catholics and Protestants shared religious imagery and ideas, especially biblical ones, but often used them in different ways. Black and white evangelicals, for instance, held different views on racial violence, but both were based on the sanctity of the household (p. 21). Andrew Johnson used the idea of redemption to discuss slavery's end in Tennessee in 1865, but later former Confederates appropriated the same language to describe whites regaining control (p. 139; see other examples on pp. 42-45, 63, 102, 110, 114-115, 125-126).

The collective essays, therefore, present a diverse picture of Reconstruction religion, while also highlighting a point made explicitly in the foreword by Charles Reagan Wilson. Biblical language, ideas, and images permeated the thought and rhetoric of Radical Republicans, white southerners, and African Americans. The volume, therefore, demonstrates the importance of understanding not simply what biblical texts meant to certain groups, but how they used them, often for conflicting purposes. Bib-

lical scholars have recently begun focusing more attention on this aspect, known as reception history (see, for instance, the Blackwell Bible Commentaries which are the first commentaries to be written using this methodology). The understanding of Reconstruction likewise would be enhanced by more historians taking up this pursuit.

I hesitate to criticize the book for something not addressed in it. While it is not intended to be comprehensive, the neglect of an essay on Judaism is unfortunate. The editors explain that no comprehensive study of the role of Jews during Reconstruction has been written. Yet, this seems all the more reason to include such an essay. Furthermore, understanding the development of American Judaism during this time is essential for understanding the complete religious picture. Relations between Jews and Christians, as well as struggles within Judaism, reflect the richness of religion during Reconstruction. Nonetheless, this is a helpful volume and a welcome move toward using religion to develop a more thorough account of Reconstruction.

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