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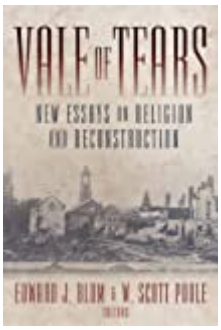

Edward J. Blum, W. Scott Poole, eds. *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction.* Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005. ix + 265 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86554-987-6; $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86554-962-3.

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Tears for the South

In the introduction to this fine collection of essays, the editors Edward J. Blum and W. Scott Poole note that their book devotes itself to "showcasing new scholarship on the importance of religious values, institutions and identities during the era of Reconstruction" (p. 3). Their introduction, the various essays individually, and the footnotes included with each essay certainly provide an excellent field guide to the recent historiography on the role of religion in the Reconstruction era. Both of the editors have written widely on the era of Reconstruction, and the authors of many of the essays will be familiar to scholars working in this field. Each of the co-editors also contributed an essay to the volume. The title, *Vale of Tears*, comes from an observation, by the editors, in the introduction: "In so many respects, the era of Reconstruction became a 'vale of tears' with all the suffering and hope that the biblical imagery evokes" (p. 5).

The twelve essays in the book are grouped into five sections. Part 1, "Sanctifying Southern Violence and Segregation," looks at the themes of white terrorism, the rise of segregation, and how white southern Christians used religious rhetoric to explain and justify these developments. Religious rhetoric, of course, can be used in many ways and with many different interpretations. In one of the essays in this section, co-editor Poole looks at "Confederate Apocalypse: Theology and Violence in the Reconstruction South." He notes that the turn to violence by many southern white Christians was inspired, in part, by apocalyptic theology and imagery. Black Christians also interpreted the times in eschatological terms, but, whereas whites saw the times as tribulation and perhaps even judgment, the freedman saw it as the day of jubilee.

Part 2 is entitled "Religion and African American Resistance to White Supremacy." In this section, Paul Harvey reiterates one of the tragic failures of Reconstruction–freedom was one thing, and true equality quite another. His essay, " 'That Was about Equalization after Freedom': Southern Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reconstruction and Redemption, 1861-1900," demonstrates how both black and white Christian southerners framed their discussion of freedom and political concepts, such as "Redemption," in religious terms, and yet often meant very different things by these terms. Blum's essay in this section, "'O God of a Godless Land':

Northern African American Challenges to White Christian Nationhood, 1865-1906," is an especially valuable essay, because the natural focus on the southern freedmen in this era often means that the life and thought of northern blacks is ignored. According to Blum, while white Christians talked about the United States as a righteous and Christian nation, northern blacks saw the country as "anything but holy, it was a bastion of sin and hypocrisy" (p. 94). While white Americans looked at reunion between northerners and southerners and the easing of sectional tensions as signs of national repentance, northern blacks knew that these developments marked (and, to some extent, were made possible by) a betrayal of the North's commitment to the political and civil rights of the freedmen.

"Religious Rhetoric, Politics, and Moral Reform" is the title of part 3. The reader is immediately reminded that the political world of the Reconstruction era was much removed from our times. Today, one party makes free use of "God talk" and religious imagery, while the other seems hesitant to broach the issue. The essays in this section by Mark Wahlgren Summers and Daniel W. Stowell show that Republicans and Democrats, northerners and southerners, whites and blacks, were all convinced that religious ideals justified their positions and that religious language best expressed these positions. Stowell's essay is especially helpful in explaining why white southern Democrats fixed on the word "Redemption" to describe their re-taking of political power in southern state and local governments. In the third essay in this section, Gaines M. Foster examines "The End of Slavery and the Origins of the Bible Belt." He addresses an interesting question that goes beyond the confines of the Reconstruction era: how did a region considered morally tainted by the sin of slavery, and which for decades had allegedly argued against churches playing any role in politics, come to be known in the early twentieth century as the "Bible Belt" and as a region that strongly supported many attempts to legislate morality?

In Part 4, "Reconstructing Catholicism," there are two very different kinds of essays. The first, " 'No Disruption of Union': The Catholic Church in the South and Reconstruction" by David T. Gleeson, takes a very broad view of the history of southern Catholicism in this era. While the Roman Catholic Church suffered no open division during the sectional crisis, Gleeson demonstrates that there clearly were sectional differences between northern Catholics and their southern co-religionists. Not surprisingly, Gleeson concludes that, "Reconstruction indicates that the Catholic Church in the South was indeed as much Southern as it was Catholic" (p. 185). The other essay in this section looks at Catholicism in the South through a localized study. Kent A. McConnell, in "'Betwixt and Between': Topographies of Memory and Identity in American Catholicism," examines how Roman Catholics in Emmitsburg, Maryland–the site of Mount Saint Mary College–remembered and commemorated the Catholic war dead, both Confederate and Union, who were buried in their local cemetery.

The last section of the book, part 5, "Religion and the Cultures of Reconstruction," contains two interesting essays, although the rationale for this part as a separate section and its title remain unclear to me–the book, as a whole, is discussing religion and the cultures of Reconstruction in one way or another. However, the essays in this section are valuable. Before reading Joan Waugh's " 'Pageantry of Woe': The Funeral of Ulysses S. Grant," I was unaware of the widespread outpouring of sympathy from southerners upon the passing of Grant. Waugh looks at Grant's funeral and its commemoration around the country, and the ways in which it became a "vehicle for a religiously tinged emotional and political reconciliation of North and South" (p. 213). The last essay in this section, "(Re)Producing White Supremacy: Race, the Protestant Church, and the American Family in the Works of Thomas Dixon Jr." by Laura J. Veltman, looks at the writings of Dixon and how racial fears informed his quest to preserve the American nation and the American family. As Veltman notes, whenever Dixon used phrases like the "American nation" or the "American family" you can mentally add "Anglo-Saxon white" before the word "American." He feared the rise of socialism in the United States that might promote "free love" and other vices, but he was just as concerned about protecting the racial purity of the American family, for when he talked about preserving the family he usually stressed preserving the racial purity of white American womanhood.

Veltman's essay exhibits something I find refreshing in several of the works included in this volume: a willingness to make the sort of value judgments that historians sometimes eschew, fearing that they violate the commitment to objectivity. Veltman argues that while we may be comforted by the fact the Thomas Dixon and his racist ideology are fading from the historical consciousness, we must also be aware that ignoring the existence of people like Dixon and their ideas leads us to a distorted view of the past. We can dismiss Dixon, she says, as someone so racist and extremist that he does not fit in the American mainstream. But, she argues, "More useful is examining how Dixon, rather than being a marginal figure whom

we can conveniently erase from memory, instead infiltrated American society, so that we can accurately situate him from within contemporary discussions of race–both of his contemporaries and ours–and understand how the views he loudly voiced might still whisper in our ears, catching us unawares" (pp. 236-237). She ends her essay with the type of challenge I would like to see more historians willing to make, asking "what is the present drawing of the color-line today in our nation, our churches, our literature? W. E. B. DuBois forces us to continue asking these questions. Let's make sure Thomas Dixon is not providing the answers" (p. 256).

Other authors in this collection also remind us of this kind of moral duty that our scholarship lays upon us. At the conclusion of his essay on northern blacks and their reaction to the view of American as a Christian nation, Blum notes that these black theologians "articulated faiths committed to racial justice, equality, and true human universalism–a type of national faith and public theology that has much to say to a United States and world that still tremble and writhe from racial and religious segregation, frustration, and violence" (p. 111). At the end of their introduction, Blum and Poole quote from Martin Luther King's book "Why We Can't Wait" about the "not too distant tomorrow [when] the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all scintillating beauty" (p. 14), and then suggest that perhaps "a deeper understanding of the complexities of Reconstruction might help us toward that 'not too distant tomorrow' " (p. 14).

Certainly this collection does testify to the complexities of the Reconstruction era and religion's role in it. As with any collection of essays, the reader's own tastes and personal interests will make some essays more interesting than others and a scholar's particular field of study or own personal religious connection may make one wish that a certain group was also covered, but I perceive no general weaknesses with any of the choices included here. The full and interesting footnotes, right at the bottom of the page where they should be, are welcome for both their explanatory comments and guidance for further study. Blum and Poole are to be commended for putting together such a fine introduction to the most current scholarship on this subject.