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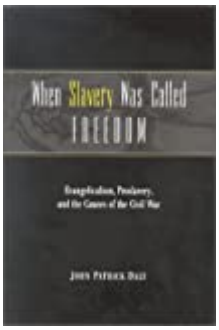

John Patrick Daly. *When Slavery Was Called Freedom: Evangelicalism, Proslavery, and the Causes of the Civil War.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002. 207 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2241-0; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8131-9093-8.

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Agreeing to Disagree

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John Patrick Daly has written a brief book about a large subject. Like many historians before, he traces the ideological roots of the sectional conflict. Drawing upon the tracts and sermons of prominent southern evangelicals, he examines the defense of slavery (and the critique of abolitionism) that they espoused in the decades leading up to the Civil War. The result is a very good book, in which he argues that what most divided Northerners and Southerners in these critical years were their shared values.

Much of Daly's material in the first two chapters on the cultural underpinnings of antebellum society covers familiar ground. Americans were fervently individualistic, and they generally believed that hard work inevitably would result in material reward. Americans did not think too hard about economic theory, but insofar as they did, they were opposed to it. For Evangelicals in both the northern and southern states this led to a two-tiered providentialism. Since material rewards were from God, a prosperous believer could take comfort in the fact that God approved of the manner in which he had acquired his wealth. Secondly, if a nation, or a section of a nation, prospered, then it is likely that God approved of social arrangements as they existed. Daly offers a more nuanced exposition than this, as do many of his sources, but his evidence suggests that many southern Evangelicals would have been comfortable with this simple formulation. In Virginian Thomas R. Dew, Daly finds a prominent spokesman, whose 1832 proslavery *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature* "signaled the growth of the national obsession with the unity of moral and material progress, and of the ideological tools and activity necessary to propagate it in the South" (p. 47). Success, whether individual or collective, was a mark of God's favor.

Daly argues, persuasively, that the more individualistic nature of southern Evangelicalism provided fertile ground for an extension of these positions. In the early part of the century, slaveholders could agree with critics that slavery might in a general way be a bad thing, but still hold that in the particular case of a Christian slaveholder there was no sin. They did not mean this simply in the sense that a benign master might meliorate the im-

morality of a bad institution. Rather, a slaveholder who imagined himself a good Christian would credit Providence with his possession of slaves. If slavery were evil, God would not reward the slaveholder with the acquisition of slaves or with profits of slave labor. Moreover, because the theology of southern Evangelicalism stressed the individual relation to God, the broader question of slavery as an institution was in important ways beside the point. Sin was a personal matter, not committed by systems in the abstract.

Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Evangelicals often had been critics of slaveholding, but as more acquired slaves, and as more slaveholders became Evangelicals, the criticisms were muted. The schisms within the Evangelical denominations in the 1840s, as southerners actively defended slavery, heralded the greater sectional divisions. Obviously, Evangelical slaveholders, who wanted to keep their slaves, might scramble for explanations to justify doing so. Many did just that, and more sermons and tracts defending slavery as scriptural orthodoxy appeared. However, Daly finds Evangelicals more often employed the language of providentialism. The South was becoming more Evangelical and more prosperous. At the same time, more southerners were acquiring slaves. Therefore, the argument followed, God ordained slavery in the South to reward Christian slaveholders and to evangelize the slaves. What their abolitionist critics failed to understand was that "God had providential purposes for slavery" (p. 54). He would not have allowed slavery to flourish if it were not a part of his plan. As that plan unfolded, and more slaves and slaveholders became Christian, and as the South prospered, "the evangelical rationale for criticism of slavery dissolved" (p. 69).

It is the issue of the southerner's suspicion of systems in the abstract that provides the material for Daly's most important work. When confronted with northern criticism of slavery as an institution, southern proslavery apologists responded with incredulity. Individual slaveholders might be cruel and sinful, they acknowledged, but in their experience most were Christian men, concerned with the welfare of slaves whom Providence had put in their charge. "Abolitionism," Daly writes, "struck southerners exactly where they were least likely to listen or feel anyone else had the authority to speak to them, in the realm of personal authority" (p. 72). On the other hand, if God had ordained slavery, as he had both in the southern states and in biblical history, then reformers who arbitrarily tried to interfere with it tried to interfere with the providential economy.

This is the crux of the issue for Daly. Both northern abolitionists (and later free soilers) and southern apologists believed that they lived in a society in which material wealth was evidence of God's favor, and that human efforts to interfere with a God-ordained free economy only challenged the will of Providence. "Men who did not allow individual character to find its reward betrayed the faith of the age," Daly writes. "This constituted both the antislavery accusation against the South and the southern denunciation of antislavery" (p. 90) To abolitionists slavery was self-evidently an artificial system that interfered with the workings of a free economy; to slaveholders abolitionism was the same.

The radical individualism of southern Evangelicals provided a new element of providentialism to the scriptural defense of slavery. Daly examines the "Rights and Duties of Slavery" sermons and tracts, exemplified by James Henley Thornwell's *Rights and Duties of Masters*. Daly calls this and similar tracts "the most significant development of the final decade of proslavery writing" (p. 112). Thornwell, astonishingly, objected to the northern characterization of southern slavery as involuntary labor. Thornwell's objection was predicated on the assumption that God had ordained certain individuals to be slaves, and that scripture required that they willingly accept their station. They might be compelled to do so despite their individual inclination, but a good Christian slave, in obedience to a higher authority than his corporeal owner, would choose to labor cheerfully. The slaveholder might control the slave's labor (just as a northern factory owner might control the labor of his employee), but the slave was free to obey or to disobey the biblical injunction to offer that labor willingly. The "Rights and Duties of Slavery" literature dissolved, at least in the minds of its authors, the distinction between free and unfree labor.

The southern characterization of abolitionism as heresy continued as the war began. Daly cites a letter signed by 154 southern clergymen accusing the North of "interference with the plans of Divine Providence" (p. 145). He also finds an explanation for the militant optimism of both the North and South in their providentialist assumptions, an experience that could be generalized to opposing combatants throughout history. Conversely, he sees the southern turn in defeat to "apocalyptic and prophetic religion" as a result of the shattering of their faith in simple providentialism (p. 152). Only then did the core values of the two regions diverge.

Slavery and antislavery apologists raged at one an-

other's inability to perceive self-evident facts and principles, and to follow simple propositions to their obvious conclusions. Historians at times have seen this as evidence that northerners and southerners used the same words to mean different things, or that southerners did not even mean what they said. John Patrick Daly argues that they indeed did mean the same things by words like freedom and Providence, but that they came to different conclusions about the implications of those concepts for the future of the nation. *When Slavery Was Called Freedom* is a valuable contribution to our understanding of antebellum ideology and the role of religious ideas in the sectional conflict.

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