I. The Civil War as a Theological Crisis – Introduction
   A. It was a theological crisis because both sides assessed it in terms of the activity of God:
      1. Supporters of slavery like Henry Van Dyke believed scripture supported it, and abolitionists' rejection of slavery was viewed as a rejection of biblical authority (Noll CW 3).
      3. Southern minister James Thornwell viewed slavery as a gift of providence given to the south to organize labor (Noll CW 2).
      4. Supporters of slavery believed slavery developed by God's providence that led to the colonization of America and the victory of American patriots in the American Revolution (Noll CW 5).
      5. From 1830s to 1865 – debate over the interpretation of scripture regarding slavery (Noll CW 6).

II. Setting of the Civil War
   A. Religion in the Era of the Civil War
      1. 1/3 to 2/5 of Americans were members of churches & double that number were adherent, participating in church life (Noll CW 11).
      2. American religion was primarily Protestant (Noll CW 11).
      3. 40% of population was sympathetic towards evangelical Christianity and church property had 2nd greatest capital investment in country (Noll, Civil War 12). 83% of church property and 95% of churches themselves were owned by Protestants.
      4. Great Awakenings – gave purpose to American lives and as a result, churches exerted influence politically (Noll, Civil War 27).
      5. Northerners began to tie future of faith & of the country with end of slavery (Noll 315).
      7. The pervasive nature of religion in American society in 1860s was rivaled and intertwined with views of a market economy. (How did this close relationship between religion & economics shape ethical practices?) (Noll CW 13).
      8. Noll says Civil War led to very little theological profundity (CW 16). Disputing evidence:
a) Negro spirituals were simultaneously songs of social protest of an overcoming faith (the precursor to Black liberation theology) which fueled popular resistance.

b) Black resistance to slavery served as a basis for later Civil Rights movement of the 1960s

c) Black response to suffering served as the basis for Christian theodicy as demonstrated in the slave narratives.

d) Noll’s view also ignores Quaker and Methodist abolitionist thinkers.

B. Historical Influences:

1. Increase of sugar, tobacco, and cotton trades as well as technical inventions such as cotton gin increased market for slave labor.

2. After 2nd GA & American Revolution, there was a movement away from the view that human freedom was limited by character. It was replaced with the belief that humans could choose (Noll CW 24).

3. Creation of a national culture after American Rev. & 2nd GA through:

   a) Creation of voluntary societies

   b) Market economics at grass roots level

   c) Separation of church and state (disestablishment) which allowed voluntary religious organizations to shape culture.

   d) Focus on commonsense reasoning (Noll CW 26).

4. Booming industrial economy

5. Baptists divided over issue of appointing slaveholders as missionaries (creation of Southern Baptist Convention in 1845) (Noll 316)

C. Ideological Influences:

1. Protestant American religious views (Noll Civil War 18):

   a) Exalted Bible instead of tradition as source of religious authority (Noll Civil War 17)

   b) Rejected received religious authority (CW 17)

   c) Emphasized the role of grace in their lives (CW 17)

   d) Protestants regarded Roman Catholicism as threat to genuine faith (Noll CW 18)

2. American civil religious views:

   a) Believed U.S. was in covenantal relationship with God that required corporate repentance and renewal (Noll CW 18).
b) Saw connection between virtue and liberty & private character & public well-being (Noll, Civil War 19)

c) Enlightenment thought assumed humans could perceive connection between moral causes and public effects.

d) Combination of Christian and Enlightenment views led to American self-confidence and moral urgency of social attitudes. (Noll CW 20)

e) Opponents willfully perverted truth and natural reason.

f) Christians believed they could describe God’s action in the world.

g) In U.S. authority & stability came from constitution (Noll Civil War 23)

3. Views of the Bible by 1860 & its influence on political views:

a) It promoted republican political theory – virtuous character and action linked with political liberty, Virtue derived from natural endowments from God (esp. after 2nd GA).

b) It was accessible to every thinking person

c) It defined liberty

d) It opposed tyranny of inherited religious authority

e) It forecast providential destiny of the U.S. (Noll, Civil War 22)

f) It was best interpreted by the common sense of ordinary people.

g) Longing for millennium with apocalyptic views of the nation (Noll 317)

Ill. Civil War as a Turning Point in American Religious History

A. Led to more secular America characterized by:

1. Large scale industrialization.

2. Emphasis on bureaucratic efficiency.


B. Short-sightedness of abolitionists who sought end of slavery while allowing long-term effects of racism through Jim Crow laws, lynching (Noll 323-4)

C. Its impact or lack of influence in western frontier areas:

1. Civil War precipitated by question of whether slavery would be allowed in western territories (Noll, 325)

2. Religious pluralism of west prevented Protestant domination (Noll 327).

3. Western churches valued support of the social order and symbols of civilization, making role of churches in west ancillary rather than central to society (Noll 328).
D. Civil War was end of synthesis of republican and Christian values that had dominated since American Revolution.
   1. Antebellum assumption – Christian virtue was needed to support republican institutions and republican institutions guaranteed religious freedom for Christians (Noll 329).
   2. Civil War led to focus on material interests and role of government instead of principles of virtue.
   3. Common-sense philosophy was replaced with Romanticism (humans could innately experience truth and beauty), and scientific view (Noll 329).
E. After Civil War, republicanism did not include freedom to leave the Union and led to stronger Federal government (Noll 330).

For Further Reading:
