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**God and Race in  
American Politics**

A Short History

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# *Contents*

*List of Illustrations*

ix

*Acknowledgments*

xi

*Introduction*

1

CHAPTER I

*The Bible, Slavery, and the “Irrepressible Conflict”*

13

CHAPTER II

*The Origins of African-American Religious Agency*

47

CHAPTER III

*The Churches, “Redemption,” and Jim Crow*

60

CHAPTER IV

*Religion and the Civil Rights Movement*

102

CHAPTER V

*The Civil Rights Movement as the Fulcrum of  
Recent Political History*

136

*Theological Conclusion*

176

*Notes*

183

*Index*

203

## *Introduction*

This book offers a simply stated thesis about an immensely complicated history. First, race has always been among the most influential elements in American political history, and in many periods absolutely the most influential. Second, religion has always been crucial for the workings of race in American politics. Together, race and religion make up, not only the nation's deepest and most enduring moral problem, but also its broadest and most enduring political influence.

Yet *how* race and religion have interacted to shape politics has differed dramatically over time and by community. Before the Civil War, religion drove abolitionist assaults upon slavery even as it undergirded influential defenses of slavery in both the North and the South. After that conflict, religion and politics worked very differently for African Americans than for the white majority culture. On the one side, church life opened a limited space for black social organization and intellectual improvement, even though the political effects of that opening would not be evident for another century. On the other side, the political effects were immediate. A Christianity mostly bereft of its antebellum social vitality played a major part in sanctioning systematic white discrimination against African Americans. In turn, the racially defined polity that religious forces helped to create

became a fixed reality of American politics into the 1960s and a precipitate of much political change thereafter. For the recent past, complexity continues. African-American religion helped spark the civil rights movement that left immense political and cultural changes in its wake, but the broader effects of that movement also keyed a politically conservative countermovement inspired by a different kind of religion. The political realignments of the last forty years, which are the most thorough of such realignments in American history, were by no means caused by religion alone, but religious factors have been everywhere evident in their development.

In other words, rather than any specific configuration of race and religion, it has been the general interweaving of race with religion, along with a discernibly religious mode of public argument, that have pervaded the nation's political history. The religious note in American political discourse has been a source of foreign comment from before de Tocqueville to the present.<sup>1</sup> It is rooted in the United States' broadly Calvinist-evangelical heritage that bequeathed a style of public discourse that continues to exert great influence, even for many who have passed far beyond the religious convictions of earlier Americans. An earnest moral concern for how governments should conduct themselves, a compulsion to sermonize about the duties of citizens and the state, and a frequent recourse to Scripture for grounding or garnishing political positions have been consistently present in American history, from nineteenth-century debates over slavery, war, and Reconstruction to recent controversies over civil rights, economic opportunity, right to life, and the ordering of families.

No short history can fully encompass such complicated themes and such complex events, but it does possess the

advantage of portraying different American eras as parts of a continuous story. In addition, a short history may allow for a sharper understanding of how interconnections among politics, race, and religion have developed over time than can be provided by the detailed studies of individual periods and events that I have relied upon so gratefully in putting together this synthesis.



There are, alas, any number of incidents, statements, or situations that could be used to introduce this kind of history—although “alas” is far too simple an interjection for the complexities of the story from Nat Turner to George W. Bush. To treat broad and weighty subjects in short compass means that I will be presenting something more like a cartoon than a real history. But even cartoons can offer a few moments of sharp focus.

One such moment occurred in July 1863, the climactic month of the nation’s most enduringly significant crisis. Earlier in July, crucial victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg turned the military tide of the Civil War in favor of the North; a week later federal officials in New York City began to carry out the draft that Congress had authorized in order to meet the war’s escalating demands for manpower. On Saturday, July 18, Sgt. Robert Simmons, an African American from New York City who had enlisted in the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment of Col. Robert Gould Shaw, was killed during the Union assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina. His death occurred only days after antidraft rioters in New York City, hell-bent on attacking the city’s Negro population, had destroyed Simmons’s family home and lynched his nephew. The riots, as a protest against the

draft in general and especially the provision that allowed men of means to hire a substitute, were fueled by the rage of poor white immigrants and left hundreds of African Americans dead. The day before Robert Simmons's death in far-away South Carolina, Maria Daly, a white diarist, had expressed fears that the New York mob would attack the block in which her home was located, since it was situated near tenements below MacDougal Street, where a band of African Americans had taken refuge on a rooftop. On that rooftop this black contingent was collecting firearms for self-defense and singing psalms for divine protection.<sup>2</sup>

Only a few years later, a conservative Catholic periodical in Munich published a long article by Father Paul Joseph Münz on the subject "Christendom and Slavery," which included full discussion of events in the United States. This journal, the *Historisch-politische Blätter für das katholische Deutschland*, had earlier provided extensive coverage of the War between the States, most of it blasting the North for hypocrisy (since northerners condemned slavery while they profited from the slave trade and the economic fruits of slavery). The journal also defended the Catholic Church as a perennial guardian of the humanity of Africans while attacking Protestants for their inability to agree on what Scripture taught about slavery. Münz recapitulated these criticisms while also asserting unequivocally "the incompatibility of slavery with the basic conception of Christianity." He closed his report with a chilling prophecy: "The North can free the slaves with force, but it cannot civilize them and deliver them from contempt and mistreatment. Here no one can help except the Church, whose main task is precisely this concern."<sup>3</sup> In 1868, when this article was written, what would prove to be the long history of American contempt and mistreatment of former slaves was barely

under way. In fact, it continued until “the church” did do something about it, although it was not the Roman Catholic Church that led the way.

In November 1900 the nation returned President William McKinley to office for a second term in a comfortable Republican victory over his Democratic challenger, William Jennings Bryan. During the campaign, Bryan had distributed a pamphlet by the Negro National Democratic League that attacked U.S. oppression of the Filipino people in the name of those who knew firsthand what it meant to suffer from official American subjugation.<sup>4</sup> Bryan’s support for black causes could not be too aggressive, however, since he needed the electoral votes of the Democratic Solid South, where the process of black disenfranchisement begun shortly after the Civil War was now nearly complete. In that presidential election, voter turnout (as a percentage of a state’s population) ranged as high as 41% in Colorado, while the ratio in most northern and western states averaged between 20% and 33%. (In this period before female suffrage, these figures represented a reasonably high turnout.) But in most of the states of the former Confederacy, with their large black populations, it was another story. African Americans were almost entirely excluded from the polls, and whites had little incentive to vote in the general election, where the outcome was foreordained in favor of Democratic candidates. Thus, the turnout in these states was abysmally low—10% or less of state population in Arkansas, Alabama, and Florida; 5% or less in Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina.<sup>5</sup>

In the immediate wake of the election, the Rev. Francis Grimké presented a notable series of lectures to the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., over which he had presided for more than twenty years. Grimké was a



former slave who had studied at Lincoln University, Howard University, and Princeton Theological Seminary before beginning his long pastorate in Washington. On November 20, 1900, he lectured on the subject "Discouragements: Hostility of the Press, Silence and Cowardice of the Pulpit." The address singled out the South for special rebuke but also spoke implicitly of the whole nation:

Lawlessness is increasing in the South. After thirty-three years of freedom, our civil and political rights are still denied us; the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution are still a dead letter. . . . The determination to keep us in a state of civil and political inferiority and to surround us with such conditions as will tend to crush out of us a manly and self-respecting spirit is stronger now than it was at the close of the war. The fixed purpose and determination of the Southern whites is to negative these great amendments, to eliminate entirely the Negro as a political factor. . . . If he dares to think otherwise, or aspires to cast a ballot, or to become anything more than a servant, he is regarded as an impudent and dangerous Negro, and according to the most recent declaration of that old slave-holding and lawless spirit, all such Negroes are to be driven out of the South, or compelled by force, by what is known as the shot-gun policy, to renounce their rights as men and as American citizens.<sup>6</sup>

A week later Grimké continued his series by lecturing on "The General Government" and "Political Parties" as "Sources from Which No Help May Be Expected." Here the national focus of his indictment was explicit: "The white people in the South, and the white people in the North, as well, who sympathize with the Southern estimate of the

Negro, had just as well understand, once for all, that the Negro is a man and an American citizen, and that he will never be satisfied until he is treated as man, and as a full-fledged citizen.”<sup>7</sup>

A full lifetime after Grimké’s lectures, on February 18, 1965, Jimmy Lee Jackson took part in a nighttime voter-registration march in Marion, Alabama. The march was designed to proceed from the Mount Zion Baptist Church to the Perry County jail, which was located only a block from the church. Jackson at twenty-six was the youngest deacon at Marion’s Saint James Baptist Church; already he had tried to register to vote on five separate occasions, but to no avail. Earlier in the week the *Times-Journal* in nearby Selma had published an advertisement sponsored by the local Citizens Council that linked the Voting Rights Act of 1964 to an earlier plan for racial equality published by the American Communist Party. The February 18 march was led by the Rev. James Dobynes. It was stopped at some distance from the jail by a large contingent of Alabama state troopers. When Rev. Dobynes knelt on the street to pray before returning to the church, he was assaulted by troopers and then dragged by his feet toward the jail. The remaining policemen waded into the column of marchers and sent participants scattering in all directions. Jimmy Lee Jackson, along with his mother and his grandfather, eighty-two-year-old Cager Lee, took refuge in a nearby café. Troopers pursued them into the café, where they beat Jackson’s mother to the floor and also struck his grandfather. When Jackson tried to shield his mother, he was shot twice in the stomach and then hustled by troops out the door, where he collapsed. Jackson was taken to a hospital in Selma, where on Tuesday, February 23, the head of the Alabama state police personally served him with an arrest warrant.<sup>8</sup>

Jackson died on February 26. That night at Brown Chapel in Selma, James Bevel of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference preached a memorial sermon to a mass meeting. His texts were Acts 12:2–3 (“He [Herod] killed James the brother of John with the sword; and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also”) and Esther 4:8 (“Mordecai also gave him [the king’s servant] a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their [the Jews’] destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat for her people”). These passages allowed Bevel to identify the biblical kings, Herod and Mordecai’s Ahasuerus, with Alabama’s governor, George Wallace.

In 1965 the Fourteenth Amendment had been the law of the land for nearly a century. It defined American citizenship as belonging to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States,” and it stipulated that no state could “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” In 1956 there were in Alabama about 500,000 unregistered African Americans of voting age. In the presidential election of 1964, when Lyndon Johnson’s name was kept off the ballot in Alabama because of his support for the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the state’s total vote was just short of 690,000 (that vote was divided 69.5% for Barry Goldwater and 30.5% for an unpledged slate of Democratic electors).

In the wake of the civil rights movement in which Jimmy Lee Jackson was murdered, African Americans finally won their own enfranchisement and began significantly expanded contributions at all levels of electoral politics. But racially defined voting remained almost as strong as in the day of

Sgt. Simmons, the Rev. Grimké, and Jimmy Lee Jackson. In 2000 white evangelical Protestants supported George Bush over Al Gore by 68% to 30%. In 2004 the white evangelical vote went to Bush over John Kerry by 78% to 21%. In 2000 Al Gore won 91% of the black Protestant vote; in 2004 John Kerry captured 86%.<sup>9</sup> Early in 2004, polling by Stanley Greenberg divided the core constituencies of the Republican and Democratic parties by variables featuring race, religion, wealth, region, gender, and age. Of all groups differentiated by these variables, the largest advantage in party identification was found among blacks, who favored the Democrats by 78 percentage points. The next largest was among white evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants, who favored the Republicans by 49 percentage points.<sup>10</sup> In light of these dramatic partisan differences keyed to race and religion, it is pertinent to remember one more fact documented by a wealth of polling—that the two identifiable groups within the American populace standing closest to each other on questions of religious belief and moral practice are white evangelicals and black Protestants.

These snapshots from 1863, 1868, 1900, 1965, and the early twenty-first century outline the terrain covered in this short history. It is a terrain defined by the intersection of politics, religion, and race. By race, I am referring primarily to the dynamic relationship between whites and blacks, though fuller attention to this subject would also show how religious factors have affected the American political history of southern Europeans, Jews, the Irish, Hispanics, and Asians as well.

For three out of the four great transformations in American history, potent combinations of race and religion were the engines that drove political change. Those transformative periods were the antebellum years from 1830 to 1860,

when slavery came to overwhelm all other issues on the political landscape; the postbellum years from 1865 to roughly 1900, when the nation gave up on the project of equal rights for all and left African Americans unprotected in the civil sphere; and the recent past from the 1950s into the early twenty-first century, when the battle for civil rights was finally won, but with unanticipated spin-off effects and ironic consequences. The one exception to the rule that race in league with religion drove American political transformations was the 1930s, when economic pressures arising from the Great Depression changed American politics in ways only marginally affected by race and religion.

This short history offers an interpretation of the other three transformations in which I try to show how the concerns of race have combined with the interests of religion to decisively shape the course of American politics. It also tries to show that, although race and religion combined differently in each of the three transformations, the successive combinations have constituted a single, continuous narrative from the slave revolt of Nat Turner in 1830 to the reelection of George W. Bush in 2004. Defining the political transformations and trying to explain how race and religion dictated the shape of their development are the major concerns of this book.

Naturally, I am aware that many of the issues and incidents canvassed here fairly cry out for moral evaluation. For the most part, however, I have tried harder to describe than to judge. Especially in our era that has become so alert to discrimination of all sorts, it may be more valuable to show how a continuous history developed than to provide a continual evaluation of that history. Yet because the ties among race, religion, and politics have been so intimate in American history—and because these ties have produced

such momentous consequences—I do pause at the end of the historical exposition to attempt a broader religious interpretation. That interpretation makes use of Calvinist theology, a strand of moral reasoning that has been well represented in both black and white American churches, and in secularized forms more broadly in the society. As I bring my history to a close in this way, I am fully aware of the irony that what I present as a response to the great racial-religious-political entanglements of American history has been itself one of the chief contributors to the moral predicaments created by those entanglements.



This book is based on my own research on the Civil War period and on twentieth-century white American evangelicals, combined with appreciative reading of the splendid scholarship that now exists for the years of Reconstruction and the modern civil rights era. While I was finishing an earlier study that dealt at length with the intensive debates over the Bible and slavery that galvanized much of American society before the Civil War, I was asked to propose a lecture series at Princeton University.<sup>11</sup> At the time I was also reading David Chappell's *Stone of Hope*, with its forceful arguments about the key place of African-American religion and white southern Protestantism in the civil rights movement.<sup>12</sup> In addition, I was being exposed to provocative work by Dennis Dickerson and Thabiti Anyabwile that charted the relatively neglected history of African-American religious thought,<sup>13</sup> and I was reading an outstanding new textbook on the Civil War and Reconstruction.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, this reading and writing was taking place in Washington, D.C., at the Library of Congress during the academic year

2004–05, when all Washington was abuzz about the “values voting” of white evangelicals that carried George W. Bush to victory in that November’s presidential election.

When these disparate trajectories began to intersect in my mind, it seemed immediately obvious that they made up not only an interesting series of parallel case studies, but a single connected history. The lectures at Princeton in the fall of 2006 and this “short history,” which expands on those lectures, try to justify that initial impression. During my work on this book, the intensively researched three volumes of Taylor Branch’s history of “America in the King Years” headed an ever-growing list of outstanding titles on relevant subjects from which I harvested much information and many insights.<sup>15</sup> Authors of these studies, many of which are acknowledged in the notes, have labored diligently to rescue the history of the Civil War era, postbellum American history, and the civil rights movement from romantic mythmaking on the one side and cynical debunking on the other. None of the scholars on whom I relied is responsible for how I have used his or her work in forming my own judgments about the general importance of race in American political history, or about the critical role that religion has played in making race so salient in politics. Yet the cumulative result of their insights, added to the findings of my own research, drive the conviction developed in this short history—that race and religion have acted together powerfully not only to shape the nation’s political history, but also to define the nation’s central moral problem.