MITCHELL SNAY'S *GOSPEL OF DISUNION: RELIGION AND SEPARATISM IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH*[1]

A recent contribution to the key role of religion in the development of the South's sectionalism comes from Mitchell Snay, professor of history at Denison University. His study relies heavily on the published writings of "Gentleman Theologians"–the elite of the southern clergy. But this patrician resource, broadened by Snay's examination of religious discourse from denominational newspapers and the official records of the governing bodies of Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches, reveals a plausible connection between the religious rhetoric about slavery, secession, and southern national identity and its political counterpart that defined the key issues which led to Civil War. But Snay is very cautious about any causal links. For example, in reference to the denominational schisms of the 1840s, he admits that "a direct line of influence from the religious schisms to Southern politics is difficult to demonstrate. The language of religious schisms and the political discourse of the 1840s does, however, strongly suggest that religious and political leaders shared a common framework for understanding the sectional conflict over slavery" (143). This qualification, though, does not negate the weighty impact of Protestant religion in the antebellum South, something Snay demonstrates considerably.[2]

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[1]1993; reprint, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997; 265 pages, with acknowledgments, introduction, footnotes, conclusion, extensive bibliography, and index.

[2]For a much different approach that centers on the South's popular culture, see Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

Since the problem of slavery defined southern sectionalism which, like the issue of

national identity, evolved chiefly in the arena of national politics, Snay suggests three reasons to

look to religion for the origins and nature of the South's separation from the North: the central

place of religion in the South's culture and society, the overtly religious nature of the sectional

controversy over slavery, and the close ties between religion and nationalism in early America

(2-5). In general, Snay views the growth of a distinctive southernness along with its practice of

slavery as part of the wider search for national identity that spanned the antebellum period,

which, according to southern Protestant clergy, fell under the purview of moral and religious

tenets. Southern clergy no doubt respected the separation of church and state, something morally

sanctioned by the emphasis of evangelicalism on individual rather than corporate salvation and

legally approved in the post-Revolution era by the disestablishment of state churches and the

disenfranchisement of clergymen from political office.

But after the crisis of 1835, they felt northern abolitionists breached a fine line of

distinction between the existence of slavery as a civil or political question, not to be broached by

ministers, and the institution of slavery and its attendant relationships as a concern of moral and

religious principles, that was open to the attention of clergy (Chapter 1, The abolitionist crisis of

1835: The issues defined, 19-52). The southerners condemned the religious attack on the

existence of slavery–a civil matter–as a false intrusion of the church into matters of the state. As

a result, they themselves felt compelled to enter the political arena in order to defend not only the

morality of slavery but also the integrity of biblical religion (Chapter 2, Slavery defended: The

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morality of slavery and the infidelity of abolitionism, 53-77; Chapter 3, Slavery sanctified: The

slaveholding ethic and the religious mission to the slaves, 78-109).

This basic rupture between northern and southern clerics over the problem of slavery

precipitated the ecclesiastical schisms of the various denominations in the 1840s and helped

define, at least from the southern perspective, the breaking away as a necessary act of

purification. In its larger dimension, some felt that the breaking of the churches' moral bond,

which they assumed to be a cohesive force for the nation politically, would lead to the severing

of the political union of the nation. But others felt, in a more positive vein, that the ecclesiastical

schisms would weaken sectional strife and thereby help to preserve the Union. Regardless, these

"harbingers of disunion" must be seen as no less an important carryover from the religious logic

of secession to the political rhetoric of secession, especially as "a restorative act aimed at purging

subversive elements and preserving original principles and institution" (Chapter 4, Harbingers of

disunion: The denominational schisms, 113-150; Chapter 5, The religious logic of secession,

151-180). Snay remarks,

> This paradigm of separation provided the framework in which Southern
> clergymen thought about political separation from the North. It was this kind of mind set
> that encouraged Southerners to see their enemies as the true seceders, who had departed
> from established principles. This interpretation of religious schism anticipated the core of
> the secessionist argument that disunion was a conservative movement aimed at
> preserving the constitutional integrity of the original Union (148).

By the beginning of the cataclysmic 1860s, ideas of providential guidance, redemptive

adversity, and civil millennialism fortuitously convinced southern clergy of the South's role as

Redeemer Nation and the New Israel, motifs appropriate not to the apostate American Union but

to the revolutionary Confederacy. The religious strains of nationalism depicted the South as a redemptive enterprise for the benefit of all mankind, and abundant parallels were made between the plight of southerners and the experiences of biblical Israel. These motifs not only provided legitimacy to the cause of the Confederacy but also reinforced the South's role as a nation both beleaguered and oppressed (Chapter 6, Religion and the formation of a Southern national ideology, 181-209). Thus, as Snay suggests,

> In a fundamental sense, the antebellum sectional controversy was a war of words. Each side essentially sought politically legitimacy through the appropriation of language. The debate over slavery involved a competition over the rights of interpreting the Constitution, the meaning of republicanism, the Bible, and civil religion. This contest over language was made possible and even encouraged by the ambivalent and incomplete nature of American nationalism in the decades between the Revolution and the Civil War. The Union was based on a loose consensus on principles embodied in the constitutional settlement of 1787. The sectional controversy over slavery forced Americans to define those principles with greater precision, which led to conflict and eventually disunion. Religion clearly reflected and undoubtedly contributed to this ambiguity. Like the concept of Union, the Bible and civil religion held contradictory tendencies that could nourish contrasting separate sectional ideologies while simultaneously uniting Northerners and Southerners under a common umbrella of beliefs (198).

While Snay's *Gospel of Disunion* limits the discussion of antebellum religion to his "Gentlemen Theologians," it reveals, in a powerful and thematic way, the influence of religious rhetoric about southern secession and nationalism–a rhetoric at the advent of the Civil War more widespread perhaps than Snay himself credits.