

INTRODUCTION

“Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other ... The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.”

Abraham Lincoln, 2nd Inaugural Address

“In the beginning ...”

It was in 1983 that my love affair with the American Civil War began. Always a history buff (a welcome hobby in my fulltime task as a Catholic priest), in the spring of 1983 I was preaching in Vicksburg MS, and had a rare chance to take a personal guided tour of the Vicksburg battlefield. From that time on, the events and people of the Civil War era became as familiar to me as my own neighbors and family. Before long, I had read all the “classic” books, gone on battlefield tours, heard excellent Civil War talks, and walked the “sacred ground” of places like Gettysburg, Shiloh, Antietam, Manassas, Champion Hill, and Kenesaw. After joining the Chicago Civil War Round Table, I had the privilege of recently being President of this august group – which included organizing battlefield tours of the Atlanta and Vicksburg Campaigns, as well as coordinating a marvelous slate of speakers for the 2005-06 year.

But as these years of Civil War interest rolled by, I gradually began to perceive a vacuum in what I was seeing and reading. There were books on every wartime topic and battle imaginable, but something was missing from this glut of Civil War materials. It was the spiritual element was strangely absent – in this most deadly of all American wars, there were few places or people that chronicled the human spirit’s search for eternal meanings and higher purposes, for Divine inspiration and justification. Throughout history, religion and faith have always deeply impacted the human race, and this was especially true in our unique North American heritage. Religion and faith were inextricably linked to the very foundations of the United States, and historically have remained a key underpinning for our society. Spiritual forces also kindled the fire of revival in isolated locales, brought solace to all classes and colors in times of woe, gave purpose and meaning to lost souls, offered challenges to societal attitudes, and provided the anchor of “holy ritual” (i.e. funerals, weddings, baptisms) in the tragedies and joys of life. All of this was never truer than in the tumultuous mid-19th century of the United States of America.

Thus, several years ago I concluded that it was not enough to just analyze Civil War battles in stunningly obsessive detail, or walk the exact paths that attacking troops took at Gettysburg. It was not enough to study in painstaking

detail new insights on some Southern general's approach at a specific 1863 battle, or argue yet again why the North won (or the South lost). True devotees of the American Civil War must look into the hearts and souls of our long-lost but unforgotten antebellum ancestors, to try and touch those **spiritual motivations** that brought them to the moral impasse of slavery, encouraged them forward into horrific battles, and sustained them in the "*terrors of the night*". For it is the human soul – touched by the indefinable "spark" of Divinity, containing the "fingerprint of the Sacred" – which in the end contains our greatest hopes, and encourages our most profound dreams. This is as true and real today as it was in 1861. The spiritual story of those Civil War soldiers, preachers, politicians and civilians who wrestled in their souls with the momentous challenges of their day simply begs to be told.

"Oh, thou heart-searching God, we trust that thou sees we are pursuing those rights which were guaranteed to us by the solemn covenants of our fathers, and which were cemented by their blood."

Rev. Basil Manly at Confederate Convention (February 4, 1861)

A perspective on the topic

Thus, this research project on Civil War religion began, and eventually (thanks to a sabbatical at Notre Dame University) came into book form. I write from two very personal perspectives – **first**, as a lifelong student and amateur historian of Civil War history; and **second** as an ordained Catholic clergyman, trained in Church history and theology, and rooted in 30 years of pastoral ministry. As such, I approach this topic not from an academic religious or history paradigm, but rather from a "popular history" perspective of a dedicated (and passionate!) generalist. In other words, "*Both prayed to the same God*" is purposely intended to be scholarly and informative but not academic or esoteric. Extensive research has been done to clearly chronicle the essential features which comprise the religious aspect of the Civil War, yet information is presented in a way and style which will hopefully attract all types of audiences – academics, historians, popular readers, and Civil War aficionados.

It has been my privilege to draw upon the scattered works of numerous historians and religious scholars over the past decades, many of whom are mentioned in the "further reading recommendations" list of each chapter. But, "*Both prayed to the same God*" is really rather unique in the teeming field of Civil War literature. It is one of the first books whose entire focus is on a broad and widely encompassing overview of religion and faith in America's Civil War.¹ While a number of previous books touch on interesting fringes or localized aspects of the topic, most Civil War books tend to ignore religion and faith, marginalize it, or limit it to a few sentences about chaplains or soldiers' desperate

prayers. There was a clear need to research the ignored material, and then make the basic issues and perspectives which make up this crucial topic available in one volume. Thus, this book has a twofold purpose – both of which reflect the motives under which this “magnificent obsession” of an idea came into birth in the first place.

DID YOU KNOW ...

The American Civil War has been known by some 30 different names? Some include *War between the States*, *Mr. Lincoln's War*, the *Second American Revolution*, the *Great Rebellion*, the *War for the Union*, the *Brothers' War*, the *War to Suppress Northern Arrogance*, the *Yankee Invasion*, the *Lost Cause*, and the *War of Northern Aggression*?

Apologia

First, the reader will find the author an unabashed **apologist** for the issue of Civil War religion. The story of the impact of religion and faith during the War simply demands to be brought out of the shadows and into the light. With churches being the dominant national influence on Americans in the mid-19th century, with perhaps as many as ½ of all soldiers taking religion very seriously, with the nation's preachers and denominations leading the charge into disunity and separation – how can anyone today claim to be a “Civil War buff” and yet ignore the overwhelming role that religion had? In the mid-19th century, people numerically heard more homilies than received pieces of mail in any year. Nearly every American believed in God and accepted the God's Laws and Presence as one of Life's givens. To somehow ignore the soldiers' desperate faith, the preachers' intense moralizing, the two Presidents' Days of Prayer and “conversion experiences”, the church's spiritual and clerical support, the civilians' charitable work, the black spirituals about freedom – to ignore all this is to miss seeing the huge elephant standing in one's living room.

Perhaps the topic has been long ignored because of the problematic nature of religion's role in our personal, societal and national lives in recent generations. As this 21st century dawns, more people are conflicted about the role of religion and spirituality in their own lives (as well as in our national life) than at any other time in our history. We live now in a highly sceptical, post-modern age - where “de-construction” of past absolutes has become the norm. Mistrust of all authority is presumed, a sense of Tradition and Transcendence has been lost, cynicism and pessimism about life is universal, and youth have troubles with “absolutes”, boundaries and commitment to anything lasting or historical.

All this is indeed a radically different world than the 1860 Civil War era – where Tradition had enormous meaning, basic respect for institutions was implicit, boundaries were expected and generally respected, and religion and faith

were accepted as foundational to all of life. Perhaps renowned historian Eugene Genovese captures best the need for a book like this in an age like this:

*In this secular, not to say cynical, age few tasks present greater difficulty than that of compelling the well educated to take religious matters serious. Yet, for all except the most recent phase of the history of a minority of the world's peoples, religion has been embedded in the core of human life, material as well as spiritual. Bishop Berkeley spoke a simple truth: 'Whatever the world thinks, he hath not meditated upon God, the human mind, and the summum bonum may possibly make a thriving earthworm, but will most indubitably make a sorry patriot and a sorry statesman.'*²

During Union Gen. John Foster's "march" towards Wilmington NC, a chaplain from Massachusetts talked with a wounded soldier of the 3d NY Artillery. The chaplain asked the soldier "Were you supported by divine grace?" The tough soldier replied "No, we were supported by the 9th New Jersey."

Overview

Secondly, "Both prayed to the same God" is intended to be an **overview** of the topic – a comprehensive summary of the central issues which frame the topic of religion and faith in the American Civil War. As an overview, this work is not intended to be chronological religious history of the War, nor an in-depth analysis of the finer shades of these issues, nor a deep delving into the theology, morality, denominational minutiae, public records, private journals or ecclesiastical histories of the time. Others have done great work here already, and hopefully more will be forthcoming in years ahead.

It is my limited goal to undertake a well-researched summary of the dominant features and central themes which make up the area of religion, faith, morality in the War between the States. These thematic overviews will be more clearly outlined in the opening chapter, but it may be helpful to the reader to immediately grasp the "idée fixe", or basic underlying themes, running throughout the entire book. These are the central premises which form the underpinning of this book - giving shape, scope, and depth to the material ahead.

(1) **The most undeveloped and ignored area of Civil War studies** is the impact that Religion and Faith had upon this conflict. It has indeed been an "elephant" hiding in the closet of Civil War research, writing, and preservation.

(2) **It was an extremely devout country that went into the Civil War.** From the very beginning of the United States, we have been "awash in a sea of faith", with religion playing an enormous role in the

development of our American entire culture and life. George Marsden has said that “*American history recounted without its religious history is like Moby Dick without the whale.*”³

(3) **In the pre-war decades (1840-1850’s), religious divisiveness paved the way for political division.** Religion and faith was used to rationalize the motives of both sides, support both Southern slavery and Northern abolitionism, inflame the country’s increasingly inflammatory rhetoric, and encourage sectarian divisiveness.

(4) **During the War itself, the single greatest institution in maintaining morale among soldiers was faith in God.** Faith had enormous role in motivation and attitudes of a huge number of soldiers – as many as one-half of all soldiers by one estimate. During the war, chaplains labored valiantly, civilians gave millions in charitable support, and slaves clung to their “invisible institution”.

(5) **After the War, religion and faith continued to play a significant role** in shaping how the conflict was remembered, empowering freed men for new worship opportunities, and providing a framework for the great “theological” document to come out of that era.

It is my most sincere hope that the pages ahead will help validate the importance of the entire subject to the larger Civil War community, as well as assist scholars and popular readers alike to more clearly see the shape of the elephant standing before us. In working to bring this topic to a more prominent position in contemporary Civil War studies, I also would hope that this work may inspire further research, interest and study of religion and faith in the mid-19th century era. There is indeed much more to be “mined” out of this rich field of gold - the ultimate, eternal Transcendent Values which gave our 19th century ancestors a purpose for living, dying and fighting in this country’s most tragic era.

Our Thanksgiving Day celebration began during the Civil War. On October 3, 1863, a proclamation by Abraham Lincoln officially established this day, in so small measure due to the advocacy of Sarah Josepha Hale, a prominent writer and editor of the popular magazine *Godey’s Lady’s Book*.

Library of Congress Civil War Desk Reference (2002)

Notes

1. The other books dedicated to this topic in its broadest perspective are *Religion and the American Civil War*, edited by Randall Miller, Harry S. Stout and Charles Reagan Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Stephen Woodworth, *While God is Marching On - The Religious Life of Civil War Soldiers* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2001), and Gardiner Shattuck Jr., *A Shield and Hiding Place: The Religious Life of the Civil War Armies* (Macon Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1987). *Religion and the American Civil War* is an excellent series of compiled essays that approach the topic in a broad-based way, and the latter two books more narrowly focus on the soldier's religious life and not on the larger religious aspects of the Civil War.

2. Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll - The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 161.

3. Jay Tolson, "The New Old-Time Religion," *US News & World Report* (December 8, 2003), 54-55.