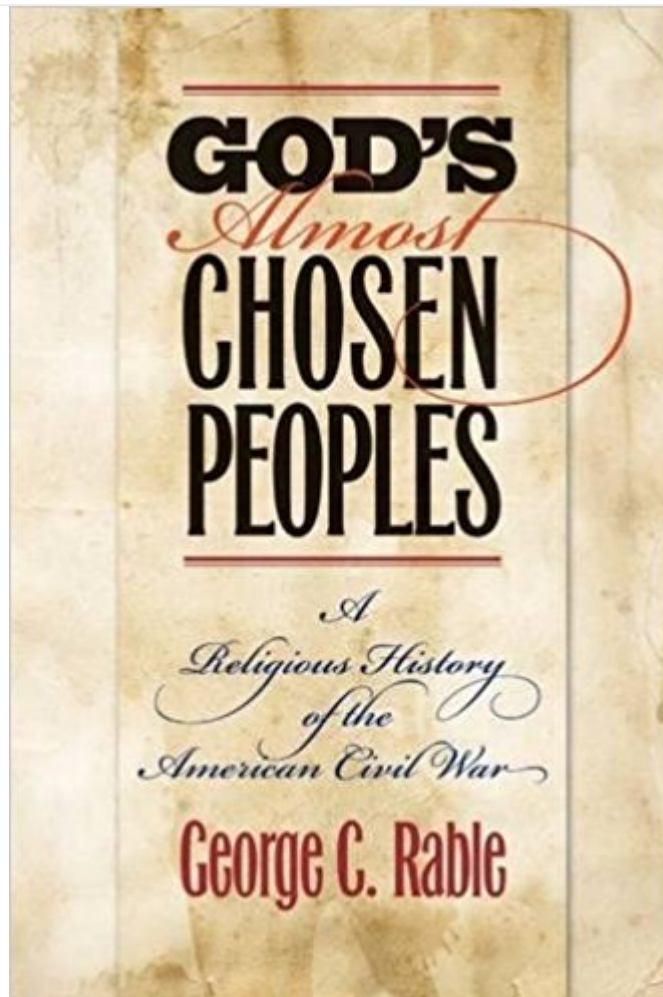


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God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War



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Reviewed Work(s)

God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War. By George C. Rable (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Pp. 624. Cloth, \$35.00.

Interest has steadily been growing among Civil War historians about the role of religion during the conflict. With the publication of a collection of diverse essays entitled *Religion and the American Civil War*, scholars began to appreciate just how understudied the topic really was in Civil War historiography.[1] George Rable's *God's Almost Chosen Peoples* is the first scholarly effort to tell a comprehensive narrative of religion and religious experiences during the conflict examining the experiences of Americans of every creed and degree of religiosity in both the North and South. Rable successfully combines the latest findings of the growing field of Civil War religious historiography with his own extensive primary source research to craft an original and valuable addition to our understanding of America's bloodiest conflict.

The comprehensiveness of Rable's wartime religious narrative makes it an extremely valuable reference for almost every religious topic imaginable during the war. Not only does he discuss the extent of religion's influence on camp life and the experience of battle, but he also talks about the role religion played in connections between the home and battle fronts. While Rable shows the important role and influence that major religious figures such as Henry Ward Beecher or Archbishop John Hughes played at the time, his book is not simply a "church history" that focuses on the clergy or theology. In fact, he strives to recover the religious views and practices of ordinary Americans as well. Though works such as Harry Stout's *Upon the Altar of the Nation* largely focused on the mainline Protestant denominations and pro-war "civil religion" in the United States and Confederacy, Rable does a good job of discussing the views of white Roman Catholics, while also briefly discussing African-American, Mormon, and Jewish religious understandings of the war (5-7).[2] Not only does he spend a considerable amount of time explaining differences in opinion and attitudes towards the war by members of different faith traditions, but Rable goes even further and

shows how some denominations despite their differing theologies and dogmas came to hold very similar positions concerning the war. For example, conservative Catholics and Episcopalians both prided themselves in doing nothing to break up the country by refusing to agitate the political question of slavery (60-61). He also provides a wealth of evidence that all religious believers across denominational divides shared at the most basic level a common belief that God through his providence took an active role throughout the conflict (397). Rable contends that such overlooked similarities are sometimes just as important for our understanding of religion in Civil War America as continuing theological disputes and differences that even wartime patriotism could not completely eradicate.

Although Rable himself describes his narrative as not primarily a “thesis-driven work,” he does, nonetheless, have several key themes that reappear throughout. The most important pattern Rable discovered in his extensive research was the fact that despite their many differences, Americans demonstrated a “remarkable consistency” in adopting a “providential view of both daily life and wartime events.” Of course, despite this shared understanding of providence, Americans still held “wildly divergent assessments of divine intent” based upon such influences as their occupation, political and national affiliations, denomination, or race. And yet, despite the horrors and hardships of the war, this faith in the active role of providence in Americans’ daily lives was incredibly flexible and resilient in the face of a number of challenges to religion, from religious indifference in the camps, to the shortage of quality chaplains, to the harsh realities of the terror and suffering of the battlefield that challenged the faith of soldiers and citizens alike. Unlike some recent scholars,^[3] Rable argues that faith in providence endured throughout the war in a remarkable way and was more typical than the loss of faith experienced by such intellectuals as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. or Ambrose Bierce (7-9, 395).

Rable, however, is not reluctant to criticize what he believes are the shortcomings of mid-nineteenth century Christian theology. He, like Harry Stout, is often critical of Americans’ providential interpretations of events, and Rable argues that “religion undoubtedly helped sustain morale and lengthen the war” (8). Indeed, he posits that this faith in providence engendered a “dangerous fatalism” that was apparent among

religious Americans regardless of denomination, discouraging both “moral and political imagination” that might have resolved the conflict with compromise rather than bullets and led to the “conviction” for many that “God’s views... coincided with one’s own” (49-50). This argument raises the question of how unique this kind of theological outlook was to the Civil War or to the United States during this time period. Perhaps our understanding of religion’s role during the American Civil War would be helped by putting it into comparative context with religion’s role during other contemporary conflicts such as the Mexican-American War or the Franco-Prussian conflict. Susannah Ural’s *The Harp and the Eagle*, for example, sets the stage for the Civil War experience of the Irish-Catholic community by discussing their service in the Mexican War and the prejudices they faced at home and in the army. Her research persuasively shows that many of the issues facing Irish-American Catholics during the Mexican War, as well as a desire to prove their loyalty and dispel religious intolerance by serving in the war, were almost exactly the same as those they faced during the Civil War. Charles Reagan Wilson’s essay comparing the American Civil War to the seventeenth-century English Civil War and the twentieth-century Spanish Civil War is another excellent model for comparative inquiry, as it gauges the relative importance of religion as a factor in the American conflict.[4]

Future religious historians of the war may debate Rable’s critical assessment of Civil War-era Americans’ providential outlook, but they will not dispute the great debt that all scholars owe Rable for writing this comprehensive and comparative study that invites rather than precludes further research on the subject of Civil War-era religion. Rable himself calls for more work to be done on particular subjects such as American Catholicism, and he pointedly refers to his project as **a** religious history and not **the** religious history of the Civil War (5). Rable’s book, nonetheless, still stands above all others as **the** book on religion during the Civil War. *God’s Almost Chosen Peoples* represents a remarkably thorough accomplishment in exploring the lives of religious, irreligious, and indifferent Americans during the Civil War, and it will rightfully be appreciated by every Civil War student, scholar, and enthusiast.

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[1] Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson, eds., *Religion and the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[2] Harry Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006).

[3] Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001); Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 193-209.

[4] Susannah Ural Bruce, *The Harp and the Eagle: Irish-American Volunteers and the Union Army, 1861-1865* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Charles Reagan Wilson, "Religion and the American Civil War in Comparative Perspective," in *Religion and the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 385-407.



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