

CRITERION

A Publication of the University of Chicago Divinity School



THE 2006 JERALD C. BRAUER SEMINAR

Dear Alumni and Friends —

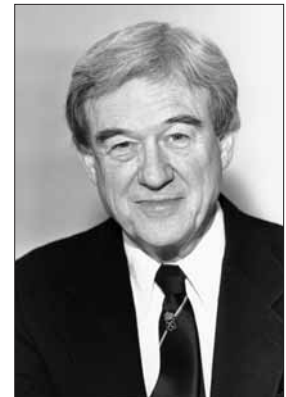
The annual Jerald C. Brauer Seminar provides a context in which graduate students may collaborate with Divinity School faculty in discussing a common theme in religion, while writing independent research papers related to that theme.

Mr. Brauer, who served an extraordinarily distinguished three-term tenure as Dean of the Divinity School (1955-1970) and the Naomi Shenstone Donnelley Professor of the History of Christianity, was universally regarded as a consummate leader of graduate seminars. Endowed through the generosity of his many students and his colleagues at the University, the Brauer Seminar honors his contributions to the graduate study of religion. This endowment provides modest stipendiary support for the students who take the course, as well as a fund to support a visit to the seminar and a public discussion by a distinguished scholar whose work addresses its theme.

The 2006 Brauer Seminar was led by Professors W. Clark Gilpin and Martin E. Marty, and addressed the theme “Religion and Violence in American Culture.”

The Civil War brings questions of violence and religion into focus with both a depth of moral profundity and scope of social consequence that is unparalleled in the history of the United States. It is therefore a remarkable accident, a marvelous work of providence, or an inscrutable turn of fate—the choice among these phrases is itself an interpretive question raised by the Civil War—that Harry S. Stout’s book *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*, was published earlier this year.

Professor Stout, Professor of History, Religious Studies, and American Studies, and the Jonathan Edwards Professor of American Christianity at Yale University (and, appropriately enough, the general editor of the critical edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*) was this year’s visiting scholar to the Brauer Seminar. Perhaps



best known to date for writings that have focused on religious rhetoric in the transatlantic world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (1986) and *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (1991), Professor Stout’s new book has speedily engendered abundant comment and controversy.

On Monday, May 1, 2006, a panel of three engaged readers from the Divinity School faculty—Professors Gilpin and Marty, and Professor Catherine A. Brekus—offered commentary on Professor Stout’s book, to which Professor Stout responded. In publishing these articles, *Criterion* is pleased both to contribute to the ongoing discussion, and to offer testimony to the continued vitality of Jerald Brauer’s vision of pedagogy in the study of religion.

I hope you enjoy this issue,

Terren Ilana Wein, *Editor*

CRITERION



Catherine A. Brekus is Associate Professor of the History of Christianity in the Divinity School.



THE 2006 JERALD C. BRAUER SEMINAR

Religion and Violence in American Culture

A Discussion of Harry Stout's
Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War

Catherine A. Brekus 2

Martin E. Marty 7

W. Clark Gilpin 12

Harry S. Stout 17



W. Clark Gilpin is Margaret E. Burton Professor of the History of Christianity and Theology in the Divinity School.



Martin E. Marty is Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of the History of Modern Christianity in the Divinity School.



Harry S. Stout is Professor of History, Religious Studies, and American Studies, and Jonathan Edwards Professor of American Christianity at Yale University Divinity School.

Religion and Violence in American Culture

A Discussion of Harry Stout's *Upon the Altar of the Nation*

A RESPONSE FROM

Catherine A. Brekus

A few years after the end of the Civil War, Walt Whitman wrote, "Future years will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background of countless minor scenes and interiors, ([...] not the few great battles) of the Secession War; and it is best they should not.

In the mushy influences of current times the fervid atmosphere and typical events of those years are in danger of being totally forgotten. . . . Its interior history will not only never be written, its practicality, minutia of deeds and passions, will never be even suggested."¹ After serving as a nurse during the war and tending to the wounded and dying, Whitman thought that no one could possibly do justice to what he had witnessed.

In his new book, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*, Harry Stout uses his empathetic historical imagination to recapture the "interior history" of the Civil War, and the result is a deeply powerful and troubling book that even Whitman would have to admire. At first glance, this book might seem to resemble the many popular

books that have mythologized the Civil War: It focuses on generals and presidents; it chronicles the devastating battles that took place on the bloodstained fields of Gettysburg, Antietam, and Shiloh; and it ends with the affirmation that America's commitment to freedom makes it, in Abraham Lincoln's words, "the last best hope on earth." But make no mistake: This is not a typical book about the Civil War. As Stout explains, he has written a *moral* history of the war—a history that "offers moral judgments in the hope that lessons for life today may ensue"—and he dissents from the many popular books that portray the war as romantic, heroic, and almost mythic.² Rather than praising Ulysses Grant or Robert E. Lee for their military skills, or celebrating Lincoln for his commitment to preserve the union at any cost, Stout asks difficult questions about the conduct of the war. Using just war theory as developed by Augustine and Aquinas, Stout asks whether the Civil War can be considered a just war. Two principles are supposed to guide the conduct of a just war: proportionality and discrimination. In a just war, the goals must be proportional to the means employed. In other words, generals cannot send their troops into situations where most will surely be slaughtered; nor can generals permit the murder of enemy soldiers who have surrendered. In a just war, military leaders must also exercise discrimination: Although they might inadvertently kill civilians, they cannot purposefully target them.

Was the Civil War a just war? To answer this question, Stout takes us year by year, battle by battle, into the carnage of



The right side won, Stout writes, “*in spite of itself.*”

the war. Using a wide range of sources—personal correspondence, presidential speeches, soldiers’ memoirs, newspapers, religious periodicals, sermons, and photographs—he shows how both northerners and southerners sacrificed their ethical principles as the fighting became increasingly desperate and intense. The Civil War, he argues, became a *total* war—a war in which the enemy was seen as so evil that almost any means to victory were justifiable. We see General William Tecumseh Sherman at the Battle of Shiloh ordering his soldiers not to retreat even though they were out of ammunition, effectively guaranteeing that many would be slaughtered; we see Nathan Bedford Forrest standing by as his soldiers murdered a hundred Northern soldiers, mostly black, who had just surrendered at Fort Pillow; we see Abraham Lincoln, celebrated today as America’s greatest president, sanctioning military attacks on civilians. And perhaps most chilling, we see General William Tecumseh Sherman and his soldiers marching into Columbia, South Carolina—a scene that reminds Stout of the nightmarish world portrayed in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. “A sort of madness enveloped him and his soldiers,” Stout writes, “as they marched in to the heart of darkness, destroying without resistance.”³ With few checks on their brutality, soldiers looted people’s houses, burned down buildings, and raped black women, leaving them naked and beaten on the streets.

Surveying all of this devastation, Stout emphasizes that “the justness of abolition, and the freedom of four million dictates that any moral history of slavery unconditionally conclude that the right side won, no matter what the casualties and sacrifices.” Yet, the conduct of the war was not just. The right side won, Stout writes, “*in spite of itself.*”⁴

The result of the Civil War, according to Stout, was not only the legitimization of total war, but the creation of a civil religion that divinized the nation. In both the North and the South, ministers justified the war as God’s cause and claimed that God was on their side. Awed by the sheer carnage of the war, ministers found religious meaning in it, blurring the boundaries between the church and the nation. They proclaimed that just as Jesus had died on the cross to save sinners, soldiers had sacrificed their bodies and their blood for the nation. As one northern minister said at a soldier’s funeral, “We must be ready to give up our sons, brothers,

friends . . . for the preservation of our government and the Freedom of the nation. We should lay them, willing sacrifices, upon the altar!”⁵ At the end of the war, the North and the South reunited around a new civil religion that portrayed America as a chosen nation devoted to the ideal of freedom—a freedom that had been purchased with the atoning, sacrificial blood of more than 600,000 soldiers. Today, this civil religion remains a prominent feature of the American landscape, with many Americans more devoted to the nation and to the sacred cause of freedom than they are to any particular religious tradition. Many Americans make pilgrimages to Civil War battlefields, or dress up in Civil War costumes in order to re-enact the most horrific battles, or read books about the heroic exploits of Lee or Grant. Most striking, many Americans revere Lincoln as an almost messianic figure.

As my brief summary suggests, *Upon the Altar of the Nation* is an ambitious, remarkable book that wrestles with profound questions about both the justness of the Civil War and the creation of an American civil religion. Although the word “groundbreaking” tends to be used too casually and frequently today, this book truly *is* groundbreaking: It is hard to imagine future historians writing about the Civil War without grappling with Stout’s interpretation. Stout has stripped away the war’s mythic veneer, challenging us to think more deeply about the sacrifices that were made.

There is much to praise in this book—Stout’s powerful evocations of the suffering on the battlefields, his troubling portraits of generals determined to win the war at any cost; his creative use of sources, including photographs and children’s books. But what I most admire is Stout’s focus on individual agency. By choosing to write in a narrative style, he reveals the unpredictability and sheer contingency of history. As we watch leaders wrestling with difficult moral decisions, we realize that events could have unfolded differently if Lincoln, Davis, or their generals had made different choices. Too often, historians write about the Civil War as if the deaths of more than 600,000 soldiers had been inevitable. Although Stout never speculates about whether the North could have won the Civil War without descending into “the heart of darkness,” this question haunts every page.

. . . Stout is quite clear that *both* total war and slavery are evil . . .



As it turns out, what I like best about the book is what some other readers have liked least. Although Stout makes it clear that “the right side won,” his narrative is not a typical celebration of the North’s commitment to the cause of freedom, and perhaps not surprisingly, some historians of the Civil War have taken offense. In a strongly negative review of Stout’s book in *The New York Review of Books*, James McPherson not only criticizes Stout for making factual errors in his narrative of military events, but for not devoting

enough attention to the morality of the war’s cause. (In his introduction, Stout explains that he has decided to focus more on the question of *jus in bello*, the waging of war, than *jus ad bellum*, the rationale for going to war.) In his own book, the bestselling *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, McPherson presents a far more uplifting vision of the Civil War as a triumphant affirmation of American freedom. While he does not shrink from describing the war’s gruesomeness, he ultimately portrays the war as redemptive, emphasizing that the bloody battles of the Civil War gave birth to “freedom.”⁶ Yet, as McPherson’s critics have noted, he never asks what “freedom” actually meant for the lives of the formerly enslaved. Indeed, Michael P. Johnson, a historian of slavery, wonders whether McPherson’s title should have ended with a question mark: Did, in fact, the Civil War lead to genuine freedom?⁷ In the closing pages of his book, Stout wrestles with the same upsetting question, and although he applauds the end of slavery, he is much less sanguine than McPherson about the war’s legacy. As Stout illustrates, northerners and southerners were linked together by their racism, and as they reunited as a single United States, few were committed to extending political, economic, or legal equality to African Americans. In addition, during the 1860s and 1870s, distinguished Civil War generals like William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan defended their “total war” against Native Americans by referring to the brutal example of the Civil War. (“We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux,” Sherman wrote, “even to their extermination, men, women, and children.”)⁸ While McPherson might grant that American freedom was more of an ideal than a reality, he is obviously troubled that Stout’s interpretation is not closer to his own. “Stout never makes clear which he regards as the greater evil,” he complains, “slavery or total war.”⁹ But in fact, Stout is quite clear that *both* total war and slavery are evil, and as a result, his account of the Civil War is far more complicated than McPherson’s narrative of moral progress. Unlike McPherson, who makes Americans feel good about our nation’s history of defending freedom, Stout exposes our failures, leaving us with deeply troubling questions about racism, religious violence, and the sacralization of the nation. Apparently this is not a message that all Civil War historians

. . . many Americans, thinking of Iraq, may find it difficult to listen . . .

—or perhaps, the readers who buy their books—are ready to hear.

Stout has also been criticized by those who are disturbed by the parallels between the Civil War and our current war in Iraq. Although Stout began writing this book more than ten years ago, before the Iraq War, I often found myself thinking about Iraq as I was reading, and so have Stout's most vocal critics. Writing in the *Policy Review*, a journal published by the conservative Hoover Institution, Ross Douthat, an editor of *Atlantic Monthly*, draws explicit parallels between the Civil War and the war in Iraq, and he argues that in any conflict between the forces of good and evil, concerns about just war are frivolous. Stout's book, he claims, misses the point. "The ends don't justify the means," he insists, but then contradicts himself: "The ends don't justify the means, but if your ends seem important enough—the end of slavery in the nineteenth century, the defeat of Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan in the twentieth—well, which leader is prepared to sacrifice *jus ad bello* for the sake of *jus in bello* and lose a greater justice for a smaller one?" (Here it should be emphasized that most northerners did not identify the cause of the Civil War as abolition, but the preservation of the union. As late as 1861, Lincoln refused to call for abolition.) Douthat continues, "If you're fighting to 'end all wars' or to 'end evil'—to borrow one of the more sweeping definitions of our conflict—then doesn't every weapon need to be considered, every measure allowed?" (Stout's answer is no. Douthat's answer is yes.)

While Douthat believes that the crimes of the Civil War were "inexcusable," he also argues that they were "perhaps the inevitable result of the sense that more was at stake in the struggle than in almost any war before or since." Criticizing Stout for his idealistic concern with ethics, Douthat defends the ultimate justness of the Civil War in order to argue that we also cannot criticize abuses in Iraq. "On a case by case basis, the abuses on display in Abu Ghraib and elsewhere were of course avoidable—but in the aggregate, tactics that violate 'the highest principles of Christian civilization' are an almost inevitable part of any occupation, any counter-insurgency, any serious attempt to reshape a dysfunctional society."¹⁰ This shocking assumption of inevitability is exactly what Stout has tried to challenge, but as Douthat's example suggests,

many Americans, thinking of Iraq, may find it difficult to listen. When Stout began writing this book, he could not have imagined that some of his future readers would respond to it as an ethical challenge to the conduct of the war in Iraq as well as the Civil War, but this is in fact what has happened. This book would have caused a stir if it had been published before 9/11, but in today's political climate, it has proven to be particularly controversial—this despite the difficulty of affixing any kind of political label to it. On one hand, liberals might resonate with Stout when, in the conclusion, he speaks as a prophetic witness against a civil religion that glorifies the sacredness of the nation at the expense of justice. On the other hand, conservatives might resonate with him when he eloquently argues that because of our commitment to freedom, we are indeed the world's last best hope. One can only hope that across the political spectrum, Americans will listen when Stout warns us that because freedom is fragile, we as a nation must never shrink from demanding that warfare be just.

In conclusion, I would like to raise a few historical questions for Professor Stout to consider. First, I have some questions about his understanding of the development of civil religion. In an earlier book, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*, Stout argued that the Puritan belief in New England as a "city on a hill," a redeemer nation, influenced the new nation's identity. Americans saw their new nation as specially chosen by God.¹¹ This idea sounds like the beginnings of civil religion. Does Stout think that a nascent civil religion existed before the Civil War, but grew stronger because of the conflict? Or does he think that the Civil War witnessed the creation of a distinctly new form of civil religion?

Second, I would like to know more about Stout's understanding of the relationship between Christianity and violence. Throughout history, many Christians have tried to follow the example of Jesus by expressing a willingness to die for their beliefs. Has the Christian belief in the atonement made Christians particularly susceptible to finding religious meaning in bloodshed?

Third, I would like to hear Stout explain why he decided against including the voices of slaves in his book. (I'm thinking particularly of the interviews with ex-slaves conducted

Lincoln's words contain a deep strain of fatalism . . .

by the Works Progress Administration during the 1930s.) As Stout shows, northerners were often as racist as southerners, and they did not identify the goal of the war as slave emancipation until late in the fighting. But northern free blacks and slaves viewed the war as a defense of their humanity, and Stout acknowledges that for them, the war did appear just. Since the war had a deep impact on slaves' lives, I would have liked to hear more about their understanding of the war as well as their attitude toward America's civil religion.

Finally, I would like to know more about Stout's opinion of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln has become an almost mythic figure in the American imagination, and although Stout clearly admires him in some respects, he also portrays him as deeply flawed. I have always admired Lincoln, but as I finished reading this book, I wondered whether he is the one most responsible for our assumption that the deaths of more than 600,000 soldiers were not only just, but somehow inevitable. In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln wisely and eloquently condemned both the North and the South for their sins. "Let us judge not, that we be not judged," he said. Yet he also implied that the war, with all of its devastation, had been God's punishment on both the North and the South for the sin of slavery:

Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn from the lash, shall be paid with another drawn by the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.'

Lincoln's words contain a deep strain of fatalism: The war had been God's will; no mere human could bring it to an end; the suffering was inevitable; and most important, the war was ultimately just because it had been *God's* war.

Stout is often critical of Lincoln, but he praises the Second Inaugural for its eloquence. I'd like to hear more of his thoughts about Lincoln's theological interpretation of the war—an interpretation that continues to shape our historical understanding of the war today.

A R E S P O N S E F R O M

Martin E. Marty

It is tempting to approach Professor Stout's book indirectly, by addressing and refuting some of the reviews it has received. In a way, that is unfair, since at this university, where he was a guest of the Jerald Brauer Seminar, we are all trained to deal primarily with primary sources—which, in this case, is the book itself.

Still, to set the book and its reception in context, one must clear some underbrush and even obscuring foliage, metaphors for uncomprehending and sometimes opaque or even obtuse reviews. Then his achievement can stand out. My use of this approach does not represent the closing of ranks or circling of wagons within the guild—though I am happy to ride a wagon in his circle and be a member of the guild he honors with his membership, the scholars of American religious history. He has produced several notable books and acted as general editor of the papers of Jonathan Edwards, while serving Yale University and some generations of students in ways that represent far more than paying his dues and winning credentials that one has to call distinguished.

Instead of being defensive on collegial terms, I would like to think that if his book is properly understood it can make a contribution not only to the study of the Civil War but to the way religious and moral discourses are perceived and prosecuted in the culture at large and how they might be freshly approached in the higher academy.

No point is served by reviewing the reviews in detail; Mr. Google stands by to be of help for anyone who is curious. Let me boil it down to a couple of issues. First, in order to make his case for treating the moral/immoral/amoral/anti-moral sides of the Civil War, he found it important to include enough narrative of battle strategies and actions so that he might show how high the moral stakes were. To do that, he

. . . capable historians have covered the battlefields inch by inch . . .



entered a crowded field, populated mainly by military and political historians, to whom he pays due respect. He told our seminar that since Appomattox, books on the Civil War have appeared at the pace of a book per day. In the course of such writing, capable historians have covered the battlefields inch by inch, and he cannot raid their findings or find enough in the original documents, which he freely used, without making some errors. Some reviewers pounced on this, particularly those who had ideological reasons to oppose his findings, narrative, and argument. These gaffes, which haunt all of us historians, do not subvert his tale or his case.

More significant were the critiques from those who had little competence in dealing with religious themes in American history, especially when it comes to discussions of “civil

religion,” the religion of nationalism, or justifications for war. Curiously, while the faith, religion, and theology of the complex Commander-in-Chief Abraham Lincoln have been subject to regular appraisal, no one, to Stout’s knowledge, had done much justice or given much attention to religion and the war itself. That is, by the way, the case with all of the American wars. We historians may do reasonably well in chronicling the lead-ups to and the follow-ups after wars, but tend to suspend the story of religion during the war.

A third manifest base of criticism is frankly ideological. Stout conceived this topic before even the first Gulf War, and had shaped it before the Iraq war. Even though he must have bit his tongue or tied a hand behind his back as he processed the manuscript to keep comment on contemporary affairs rare, cautious, and judicious, so much of what he finds

Just war argument does not have to be Christian.

immoral during the war is being replicated in the current one. The metaphor of the sparrow flying into the badminton game and getting hit by the players who have something else on their minds comes to mind in Stout's case. He had enough troubles dealing with the morality of the Civil War by itself and did not need to invite trouble by alluding, however slightly and lightly, to the Vietnam and Iraq wars.

In my oral response I mentioned that this slighting of his crucial subject by historian Stout was not necessarily a result of ideological secularism in the academy, but more of a lack of awareness by many concerning the role religion plays in affairs that look merely military, political, or, at best, cultural. Stout has given a controversial reading of the moral—his choice of term and subject—and religious—which keep surfacing—dimensions of the tragic conflict.

In the Brauer seminar he and the students and instructors wrestled with the issue of genre. What counted as evidence for Stout? What tentative conclusions did he draw? What subjects interested him? In the course of that talk and his response to three critiques in a public session, it occurred to me to place his work in the category of rhetorical history or, perhaps better, the history of rhetoric. We might hunger for more surviving documents by unknown preachers and soldiers on the scene. We *do* have many letters, but not many of them can reflect on the issues of God and death at any length. Worst of all, we have virtually nothing from the tens and tens of thousands of African Americans, slaves, ex-slaves, and the like, to assess their understandings of what was going on.

So Stout worked with the letters, dispatches, reflections, and orations of key figures, including the President, Democrats on the Union side who bitterly undercut him, Confederate leaders, generals, memorialists, and, not least of all, preachers. Rhetoric being the art of persuasion, whether in speech or writing, the historian who deals with it constantly reckons with the ethos or character of the rhetoricians, noting the results and effects of the discourse. He or she looks also at the pathos, the situation and circumstances and outlook of the participants who are being addressed. And there is the business of the logos, what is being said.

The preachers are among the more disturbing contributors to the rhetorical lore which Stout tracks so well. Few can

escape scrutiny or negative judgments, whether in the light of how issues of war are regarded in later times—most of us agree we are not doing much better now—and the norms by which preachers themselves want to be judged, beginning with Protestant interpretations of the Bible. The Confederate preachers were most sure that God was on their side and would justify all their actions, no matter how atrocious, because God had endorsed the cause of Secession and retention of slavery. The Union-side preachers were hardly better, and being considered humane and liberal and noted men of God, Horace Bushnell most visibly among them, did not moderate the fiery self-righteous language.

In his discussion of the Civil War in the light of moral norms and judgments it was appropriate and even urgent for Stout to view much of what happened in the light of classic “just war” categories. These antedated the Civil War by a millennium and a half, and had been regularly refined and regularly violated in numberless conflicts on “Christian” soil from Augustine to 1861–1865.

Just war argument does not have to be Christian. Many Christians have located it in “natural law” and argued that it can be deduced, supported, followed, and wielded by non-Christians as well as Christians. Most American people of 1861–1865 certainly saw themselves as Christians, while both sides tried to out-Christian the other. There may be—in fact, there are—some alternatives to just war approaches. One of these, of course, is pacifism, which would have meant that the North would not have responded after the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861 and while the Confederate States were seceding. Pacifism was rare, visible only among a few small religious dissenting groups. At the other end would be totalist approaches, which give legitimacy to killing without letting anyone even suggest that moral perspectives be brought in.

In Stout's version, based on a very extensive reading of the sources, some versions or other of just war thinking and language were second only to practices in which partisans—Bible-believers all—invoked biblical stories or injunctions, ripped from contexts of ancient Israel and Rome and applied, not surprisingly, on the side of those who did the invoking. The fact that these canceled each other out did not lead to restraint in citing them. God justified the Cause of the Con-

Both sides were sure of their moral contentions . . .

federacy before it was the Lost Cause, and then the policies that followed in the era of Reconstruction and segregation. God justified the Union's efforts to hold the nation together. Abraham Lincoln—here I am borrowing the title of an Edmund Wilson essay—perceived “The Union as Religious Mysticism” in ways that sometimes came close to apotheosizing the nation. In the end, to his credit, let it be said, in his Second Inaugural Address and in some memorials and memoranda to himself, Lincoln moderated that and invented the concept of “the almost chosen people” to help stay this side of idolatry, which would have been the appropriate category had he removed the “almost . . .” from his writing and speeches.

Phase One of just war theory, *jus ad bellum*, the issue of justice in a lead-up to a war, seems clear enough in the case of the fired-upon North, though Confederate spokespersons strove to make the case that the Unionists had been aggressive provokers for decades. Both sides were sure of their moral contentions, as both sides tend to be in all Christian wars, and presumably all wars where leaders try to justify their actions to an onlooking world.

Phase Two, after war begins, *jus in bello*, justice in war itself, is the dimension that most troubles Stout after reading tens of thousands of pages in which both sides left morality behind when they found it necessary to do so to win the war. Sometimes they used rhetorical means to delude themselves and try to convince others that their actions were right, meet, and just. At other times they were patently hypocritical, using their own claims of *jus*, justice, as certification that they *were* moral as they took steps which they regarded to be urgent for survival, to say nothing of victory.

In effect, the moralizers and moralists had little of anything to go on except just war approaches, whether or not they knew the name or the historic version of topics and categories within it. Stout's book shows how near to useless it was or became when it counted. He cites a range of people, General William Tecumseh Sherman being by no means an isolate among them, who called war hell, and the pages of this book illustrate that proposition in detail that is hard to forget. To picture the commanders' regular orders to lines of thousands of foot-soldiers that they advance in suicidal waves is enough to call the moral quotient into question.

Much worse was the choice, when morality no longer could be an instrument to help one side prevail, to take an “anything goes” approach.

When it came to that, almost no one, including Lincoln, the figure who in the end survived with some measure of moral framework intact, failed to resort to encouraging or permitting murder, atrocity, and limitless despoiling, torture, rape, and savaging. Stout mentioned in a panel that to his surprise no one has yet assayed to calculate the number of civilian losses in the war. There is no need to. One can take a slice of testimony and report from any afternoon or along any mile of Sherman's March to the Sea or many other such diversions from non-hell tactics, and there would be enough to show how unheeded *jus in bello* injunctions were.

One feature of the rhetoric that has such obvious relevance that Stout rightly chose not to be obvious himself was the South's theological justification for its actions with the claim that God was on its side. How could one know? Simple: Look at the Confederate Constitution, which identified that “nation” with divine purposes and encouragements. To seal this, the Confederates pointed out that the United States Constitution, having been written by deists and other infidels, was godless, and therefore God could not be credibly invoked by the Union side. I would say that “precisely” the same argument is advanced by some camps of self-identified conservatives who would seek official notification to God and themselves and “the other side” and the eyes of the world that America is a religious, godly, and even Christian nation. I cannot say “precisely” because many of such contenders today do not think that deists and infidels wrote the Constitution. They tend to render the founders “born again” by terminological twists and expressions of bemusement: How could our pious founders have neglected to turn into the law of the land what they must have believed—that all must bow to Providence as they conceived God then and partisans conceive God now?

Stout has a fine feel for the rhetoric of irony, and some of his side glances illustrate this. Among the many things that I should have known but did not until I read this informative book was how Lincoln and company countered the South's claims. It finds parallels in efforts of beleaguered “blue state” Democrats today to scramble their way into

. . . many of us would be more forgiving of Lincoln
the blood-letter than Stout tends to be.

versions of “morality” and “godliness” that might win them some points. Let Stout tell it:

In an [*American Presbyterian*, August 4, 1864] editorial titled, “Shall we be a Christian nation,” the editors argued for a constitutional amendment whose preamble would explicitly mention God, Jesus Christ, and the scriptures as “supreme authority.” This they posed in opposition to “this senseless clamor about church and State. It is an old stager—a foggy of the fogiest kind.”

Although unwilling to proclaim America a Christian nation on the grounds of the separation of church and state, and aware of the Confederacy’s boasted Christianity, Lincoln agreed to a compromise that would strengthen the links between Christianity and America’s civil religion, while keeping each distinct. Without seeking to amend the Constitution to create a Christian republic, he would create a national motto invoking trust in God and have it struck on the nation’s coinage. On April 22, the first coins were struck with the new Federal motto, “In God We Trust,” a calculated response to clerical and evangelical demands for a Christian Constitution. Given the materialism condemned in Northern pulpits, Lincoln could not possibly have picked a more ironic symbol to represent Christianity than the nation’s cash. [Stout, p. 373]

In Stout’s telling, Lincoln’s calling of fast days amounted both to practical morale-building politics and an evident tendency in his own thinking to engage in ever more profound theological reflection. He does see that while Lincoln, a man of his times when it came to viewing African Americans as inferior, transcended his times by coming to advocate abolition of slavery as a corollary to his main goal, saving the Union. At the same time, Stout sees the Emancipation Proclamation as a rather desperate attempt to turn the carnage—a common word in the Stout vocabulary—into a moral cause.

Historian Stout is well-versed in arguments over civil religion, and his book is instructive concerning many nuances which gained color and depth in the Civil War, the core event in the nation’s history. He shows how close some versions of that religion were to idolization of the Union, the

Confederacy and, again, the Nation, but is also reverent about its partly positive sides. Schooled as those of us are who studied under and were convinced by historian Sidney Mead [see his *The Lively Experiment* chapter on Lincoln, among other of his writings] to reckon with Lincoln as the most profound theologian of the American experience, many of us would be more forgiving of Lincoln the blood-letter than Stout tends to be.

In the end, however, on balance, for all the noticing of the cries of mothers, the killing of children, the burning of fields, and the enormously wasteful cost of lives of soldiers, Stout has to say that, whether moral or not in most of its respects, “on balance,” good came of the War. He is also enough of an ironist or tragedian to see that the nation, and not only the South, subsequently did not seize the moment and take advantage of the moral possibilities that came with Emancipation and the “binding up of the nation’s wounds.”

Stout’s own judgment in his introduction, one that infuriates those who see all of America’s wars as just, is modest but seems to be born out by his evidence:

In a moral history of the Civil War, it is not enough merely to say that the end of human bondage in the United States was worth a million white lives, true as that may be. The separate question of war remains: was it just? Here it is possible, and, I believe, reasonable, to conclude that the right side won *in spite of itself*. Instead of declaring the Civil War a just war dictated by prudent considerations of proportionality and protection of noncombatants, I argue that in too many instances both side descended into moral misconduct. [p. xvi]

Harry Stout, in a book that will live, provides both raw material for and tentative conclusions to advance debates that will not end with the war in Iraq or those that will follow. He will continue to be assailed from left and right, from pacifists and war-hawks, but both sides will do well to read *Upon the Altar of the Nation* before they engage in uninformed argument while wearing ideological blinders. We who remain celebrators of Lincoln and in the camp of those who believe that “the right side won” will be making our own future statements with measured caution, thanks to scholar Stout.

The language of sacrifice and martyrdom constantly reappeared
in the sermons and speeches of the day . . .

A R E S P O N S E F R O M

W. Clark Gilpin

In the introduction to his new book, Harry Stout focuses on explaining its subtitle: *A Moral History of the Civil War*. “Moral history,” he says, attempts to instill “a heightened sensitivity to what actors might have done, what they ought to have done, and what, in fact, they actually did.” In the case of the Civil War, he proposes to appraise the actions of political and military leaders in terms of “widely recognized, long-established principles of just war.”

On the one hand, just war principles examine the reasons for going to war—whether, for example, the war is aggressive or defensive. On the other hand, just war principles make judgments about the conduct of war, repudiating attacks against noncombatants and asking if the destruction of life and property is proportionate to the strategic aims of the conflict. Moral history makes these judgments about past human behavior not in order to vilify or glorify the dead but in order to focus historical attention, “with all possible integrity and disinterestedness,” on historical acts of ethical decision-making “in the hopes that lessons for life today may ensue” (xii–xvi).

In response to Stout’s remarkable analysis of the Civil War, my comments focus attention not on the book’s subtitle but rather on its title: *Upon the Altar of the Nation*. I do so in order to ask about the relationship of religion to decision making and, hence, the relation of religious history to moral history. Specifically, I propose that the opposing sides in the Civil War shared theological assumptions that operated to divert moral reflection away from both the *aims* and the *conduct* of the war. Put differently, theology definitely had moral points to make about the Civil War, but these theological points did not engage the ethics of just war and all too frequently militated against ethical reflection based on just war principles.

As I read *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, I found that Stout’s title was virtually a collective quotation of Civil War rhetoric, both public and private, both North and South. The language of sacrifice and martyrdom constantly reappeared in the sermons and speeches of the day, as the devastating loss of life mounted over the course of the war: “the loss of the martyrs whose lives have been sacrificed” (134); “fallen as a noble martyr upon the altar of his country” (200); “a bleeding sacrifice upon the altar of its country’s independence” (228).

Stout is, of course, well aware of the omnipresence of rhetoric of sacrifice, which generals, politicians, journalists, and ministers deployed as one of the instruments of war. Stout further proposes that language about sacrifice “upon the altar of the nation” had massive cultural consequences in subsequent decades of American history. It would prove constitutive of the American patriotism and civil religion that emerged from the war. The experience of war as sacrifice made the Civil War the defining phenomenon in American history and, in the process, transformed the relation of religion to American patriotism. As Stout explains, “in 1860 no coherent nation commanded the sacred allegiance of all Americans over and against their states and regions. For the citizenry to embrace the idea of a nation-state that must have a messianic destiny and command one’s highest loyalty would require a massive sacrifice—a blood sacrifice. . . . As the Civil War progressed onto increasingly eroded moral ground, something transformative simultaneously took place that would render the war the defining phenomenon in American history. Patriotism itself became sacralized to the point that it enjoyed coequal or even superior status to conventional denominational faiths” (xxi, xviii).

Although I return in my conclusion to the role that the idea of sacrifice played in the formation of American civil religion, I first want to sketch a profile of sacrifice as a theological model of interpretation during the Civil War. My theological sketch begins with Professor Stout’s earlier work on the history of preaching in New England. In *The New England Soul*, Stout examined the classic structure of the jeremiad, a sermonic form in which defeat, loss, and suffering did not mean that God had deserted the chosen people in favor of the enemy but only that God was testing the

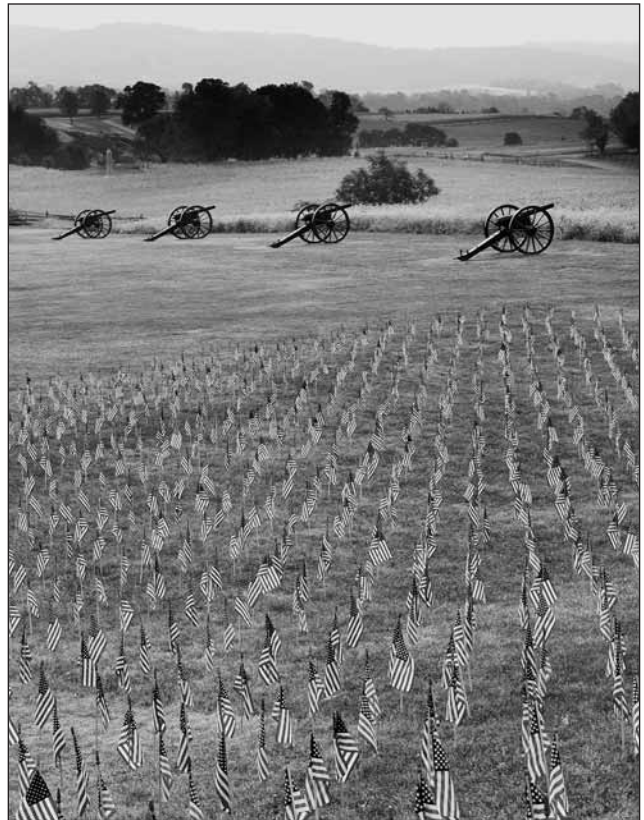


. . . the calamity is not itself the sin but is, instead,
the punishment for sin.

chosen people and purging them of sin. The proper response to divine chastening—so the preacher of jeremiads would proclaim—was sincere and humble repentance, in order to fulfill the divine purpose. God, the watchful parent, disciplined the people whom he loved. Note here that the calamity is not itself the sin but is, instead, the punishment for sin. Note also that the religious response is to uncover the meaning of the calamity as an occasion for the moral purification and education of God's people. Note finally that the most common moral judgment about the *direct* agents of the calamity was to observe that God had turned evil designs to a greater good, as when God hardened the heart of Pharaoh during the calamities leading to the exodus from Egypt.

At the beginning of the war, variations on the jeremiad became the “main fare” of moral and religious declamation on the course of events, and “this rhetoric would continue to inform the deepest national identities of the Union and the Confederacy in the Civil War” (xx, 38, 47, 78). But, as the war unfolded, massive devastation of life and land exerted tremendous pressure on the classic structure of the jeremiad. In the same way that just war theory evaluates the conduct of war in terms of the proportionality of loss to purpose, so the religious experience of the war had to contend with a profound question about whether seemingly endless carnage was really a proportionate expression of divine discipline. These pressures reshaped the theology of the jeremiad in three distinct directions: providence became fatalism; chastening discipline became martyrdom; and the wilderness became consecrated ground. This reshaping molded the theological presuppositions for ideals of sacrificial martyrdom “upon the altar of the nation.”

The jeremiad assumed a providential worldview in which God directed creation and human affairs with a wise benevolence, which, even when it required the sharp discipline of a wayward people, would unfailingly achieve the divine good purpose. During the Civil War, the providential view of history shifted toward “a de facto fatalism” (93), which required human acceptance of the inevitability of the facts and events of history. Stout thinks that this shift included “a sort of mystical fatalism” on the part of Abraham Lincoln (145), and it is a very interesting interpretive question whether the outlook represented in Lincoln's writings and speeches



during the war—for example, the Second Inaugural—is better described as providential or fatalistic. My point, however, is that neither outlook encouraged reflection on the ethical dimensions of the war itself but, instead, tended to regard the war as an inescapable fact that arose from causes beyond the power of human agency. As interpretation of the war turned more toward fatalism, it also became agnostic about the benevolence of the transcendent powers that directed events. Humans might organize meaning and moral conduct around “the cause” for which they loyally fought, but in the midst of the carnage it became less clear that meaning and morality were arising out of the providential course of the events themselves.

The war precipitated what might be called a crisis in the religious meaning of suffering, and this, too, accentuated the notion that meaning and morality were derived from the cause or ideal for which one fought. The classic jeremiad

War was a calamity visited on humanity
by transcendent causes.

had presupposed that suffering deepened the self, engendering repentance for sin and opening insights into the ways of God. Looking back on the Civil War, I wonder if the war marked the final eclipse in American culture of this didactic theory of suffering. In any case, the war shifted attention from suffering as a source of religious insight to suffering as a mark of moral fidelity to a cause, and in so doing, the war elevated the social persona of the martyr. Martyrdom emphasizes the cause for which the martyr bears witness and dies in a way that the classic jeremiad does not. This elevation of the cause as a sacred ideal justified suffering and death in allegiance to it. Equally important, it transcendentized the ideal in a manner that carried it beyond moral appraisal: “freedom” stands beyond moral criticism in a way that is not true of a concrete decision to emancipate slaves in those states that have seceded from the union. The ethic of fidelity that enveloped the ideal of martyrdom for a cause deflected attention away from the ethic of critical judgment expressed in just war principles.

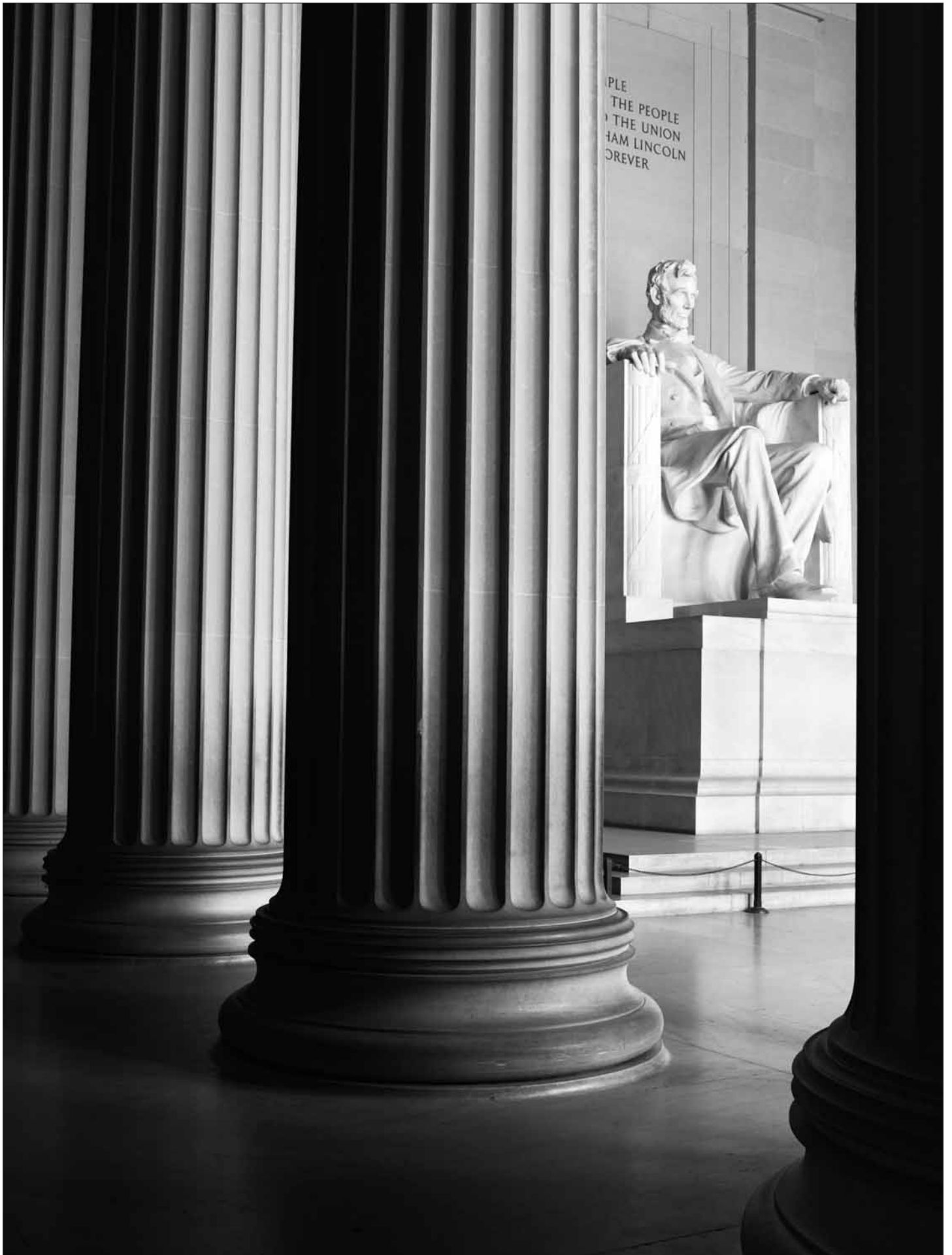
Finally, the Civil War altered the Christian spiritual geography of America. The landscape of the classic jeremiad was a biblically resonant “wilderness”: not itself the promised land but rather the desert of privation, testing, and purification, as, for example, in the narrative landscapes of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* or John Milton’s *Paradise Regained*. The Civil War transformed the wilderness into land that had been consecrated by blood sacrifice. Thus, the southern Presbyterian Robert Dabney preached at the funeral of his friend, Lieutenant Abram Carrington: “Surely [his] very blood should cry out again from the ground, if we permitted the soil which drank the precious libation, to be polluted with the despot’s foot” (201). Consecrated ground requires loyalty from those who would protect it rather than, as with the wilderness, prompting spiritual self-interrogation and moral discernment. Historically, this theme of consecrated ground is closely associated with the martyr tradition, and, once again, its emergence during the Civil War raises interpretive questions about Lincoln; in this case, about his Gettysburg Address.

What were the moral consequences of these theological transformations? I think they set firmly in place the religious preconditions for the creation of the modern American ver-

sion of civil religion, which Professor Stout directly associates with the Civil War. First, neither the providential nor the fatalistic interpretation of war provided an adequate platform for theological and ethical evaluation of the war. War was a calamity visited on humanity by transcendent causes. It took mythic form in the four horsemen of the apocalypse, and cosmic inevitabilities cannot be easily rendered as fully human decisions in the way that just war theory would propose. Second, the notion of the martyr who willingly died for the establishment of transcendental national ideals established the paradigmatic persona on which true citizenship is founded. It established loyalty as the ethical norm for understanding what authentic adherence to the civil religion would look like, in the same way that ancient Christian martyrs had established the norm of authentic faith. Third, the morally dangerous spiritual landscape of the wilderness was transformed into a land blessed by a founding act of violence. None of these three theological assumptions provides a framework for critical religious and ethical evaluation of the reasons for going to war or the morality of conduct during war.

My questions for Professor Stout arise, in no small measure, from the power of his analysis of this Civil War source for civil religion. How did the United States avoid the more or less permanent creation of *two* civil religions, one North and one South? Given the way rhetoric of inevitability, martyrdom, and consecration organized violent conflict during the war, how did one civil religion emerge in the United States, with, ironically, the modern South as its most outspoken advocate? To what extent, in the century after the Civil War, did the African American serve as the scapegoat who absorbed the violence of conflict and thereby made possible a distinctly white American civil religion, uniting North and South?

With such questions, I am perhaps asking Professor Stout to provide us with a second volume of moral history, a volume that would focus on the gradual formation of American civil religion in the century from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the same decade in which a famous essay by the sociologist Robert Bellah popularized the phrase “civil religion.” Put differently, *Upon the Altar of the Nation* engaged me both as historian and as citizen, and I look forward to hearing more.



I set out looking everywhere for evidence of moral commentary
on the war . . .

B R A U E R S E M I N A R R E S P O N S E

Harry Stout

I want to begin by thanking the organizers of the Brauer Seminar for inviting me to meet with members of the seminar and to participate in a follow-up public symposium on my book *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*. In particular, I want to thank the graduate students who discussed my book in the seminar with insight and enthusiasm, and the symposium commentators: Professors Martin Marty, W. Clark Gilpin, and Catherine Brekus.

In his opening welcome, Professor Gilpin noted the happy coincidence of my book's appearance in a year given over, in the Brauer Seminar, to the subject of "Religion and Violence in American Culture." The timing, he noted, could not have been better. At my end, the timing could not have been better either, though for a different reason. Early radio interviews and reviews of my book by neoconservative critics were almost universally negative. For most, my book was viewed as a referendum on the current war in Iraq. Many had even assumed I had written it in the last two years (in fact it took twelve years of research and writing). Some responses were so vociferous that I actually began to wonder if I had written the book I thought I had written. To my immense relief, the Brauer Seminar responded to the book I had actually written, and for that I remain immensely grateful.

Before responding to the three critiques, I would like to offer a brief overview of how the book came to be written. As I explained in the seminar, my book began as a title in search of a book. I was speaking with a colleague about where our next projects were going, and after some moments in which I outlined my interests in the Civil War, religion, and just war theory, he replied, "it sounds to me like you want to write a moral history of the Civil War." A moral history of the Civil War. I liked it. I had my title; now all I had to

do was examine the literature, which I assumed was voluminous, and reach my own conclusions. And then came the Big Surprise. In all of the vast and yawning literature on the Civil War, there was not one comprehensive moral analysis of the war that looks at both sides through the prism of just war theory as it has evolved over millennia from St. Augustine in the fifth century to the Geneva Conventions. This crucially important dimension of the war, I soon realized, was the elephant in the living room that nobody wanted to talk about.

In pursuing a moral history of the Civil War through the lens of just war theory, I concentrated my search on issues of just conduct in the war (*jus in bello*), in particular the categories of "proportionality" of battlefield losses to ends achieved, and "discrimination" in the strict protection of non-combatants. With these as my guideposts, I set out looking everywhere for evidence of moral commentary on the war in letters, the press, art, music, photography, sermons, children's literature and, of course, the actual battles. Although I spent three years simply trying to understand the military history of the war, I knew that I wouldn't contribute anything original to the millions of words spilled on Civil War history. But at the same time, I knew that few of those words addressed hard moral questions on both sides of the conflict.

Once I completed the research, a disturbing pattern of moral avoidance appeared on both sides at all levels of society, from the mighty to the ordinary, from the war front to the homefront. Of course, there was no shortage of moral outrage directed at the enemy, but of one's own conduct during the war, there was just a big silence. The lack of moral commentary on just conduct for one's own side and the unreserved worship of the nation states went a long way toward explaining how there could be such egregious misconduct on both sides of the conflict, both in terms of disproportionality of destruction on the battlefield and deliberate assaults on civilian populations.

The most surprising silence was found among the clergy. As a religious historian who has studied sermons for too long, I was shocked to see how thoroughly co-opted the clergy were, North and South. Traditionally, ministers served as prophetic voices outside of government, calling their society to account for its sins. But in the Civil War, patriotism

. . . my book was not just another military history of the war,
but something different, and more disturbing.

trumped morality on almost every front. Patriotism on both sides was so omnipotent and stifling that it assumed the force of a religion. The Civil War, I concluded, not only forged an all-inclusive nationalism, it also incarnated a “civil religion” replete with sacred monuments (e.g., the mall in Washington, D.C.), sacred texts (the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address), sacred days (e.g., Memorial Day), and a sacred totem (the flag).

In pointing out the egregious misconduct of the war on both sides of the conflict, I clearly struck a nerve with some military historians and neoconservative public intellectuals who wanted a clean and honorable war and a restored union that they could worship without reservation. And so they ducked my moral and religious arguments and chose to read the book solely as a military history. In effect, they compared my admittedly derivative military history to the likes of Bruce Catton, Shelby Foote, or James McPherson, and, not surprisingly, found it wanting. At the same time, they ignored the central interpretive argument of my book, perhaps because they couldn’t face it, or perhaps because they simply didn’t get it.

As I listened to the three comments by Chicago Divinity School scholars deeply familiar with religion in American history, it became gratifyingly clear that they “got” my argument and recognized how my book was not just another military history of the war, but something different, and more disturbing.

In his comments, Professor Marty hit the nail on the head when he labeled the book a “rhetorical history” of the Civil War. That is to say, my book marshals a moral argument, presented in the form of a narrative, that examines the rhetorical response of key participants in the war, from soldiers in the pits to statesmen and generals. This rhetorical response, Marty recognizes, effectively sought to stifle hard moral criticism in ways that many Civil War military historians have sought to perpetuate. To be fair, Marty recognizes that non-military historians must share in the blame for this moral oversight: “We historians may do reasonably well in chronicling the lead-ups and the follow-ups after wars, but tend to suspend the story of religion during the war.” But once the story is out, scholars like Marty recognize the

moral misconduct. He recognizes also the implications of “forgetting” that story for subsequent American experiences in war right down to the present, when “so much of what [Stout] finds immoral during the [Civil] war is being replicated in the current one.”

Marty makes the important point that just war theory doesn’t have to be Christian, but participants in the Civil War thought it did, and had no doubt whose side God blessed as “just.” The North and South each perceived itself as a Christian nation that would eventually enjoy a divinely mandated victory. In the case of the Confederacy, this identity was explicitly incorporated into its Constitution—a fact that was not ignored in the North, prompting outrage among Republicans and calls for an amendment to the Federal Constitution that would explicitly designate America as a “Christian nation.” Many present-day Republicans on the “Religious Right” also share their nineteenth-century predecessors’ proclivities whereby, in Marty’s words, “camps of self-identified conservatives . . . seek official notification to God and themselves and ‘the other side’ and the eyes of the world that America is a religious, godly, and even Christian nation.” Marty also interestingly observes that present-day Christian conservatives go even further in rewriting American history, by forgetting that most of the Founders were Unitarians or Deists, and portraying them instead as “born-again” evangelicals.

Like Marty, I was intrigued by Edmund Wilson’s classic essay on “The Union as Religious Mysticism,” which first broached the notion of Lincoln’s civil religion in sacred categories generally reserved for otherworldly religions. On the subject of Lincoln, Marty (speaking for the good people of Chicago) would like to temper my criticisms, which I am happy to do as long as I don’t have to eliminate them. In fact, I will say for the record that whatever shortcomings I found in Lincoln, on balance I believe he was America’s greatest president.

Turning to Professor Brekus’s commentary: I have profited immensely from the penetrating questions she raises, but also for taking on some of my more vociferous critics in ways that sometimes felt like she had taken the words out of my mouth (perhaps not surprising, as she endured six years of graduate school as my advisee). In particular, she

. . . the emphasis must be on an American civil religion . . .

addresses critical reviews by the widely acclaimed Civil War historian James McPherson and *Atlantic Monthly* editor Ross Douthat.

In many ways, Brekus reads my argument like Marty, except instead of referring to “rhetorical history,” she speaks of “empathetic historical imagination” and “interior history” to get at the moral crux of the Civil War and its cultural and religious significance in American history. In laying that narrative alongside Professor McPherson’s negative response, she, like I, wonders if he read the book I wrote. McPherson is a political and military historian, but doesn’t handle big ideas very well, especially if they are religious or moral. He is also the Civil War’s leading cheerleader, interpreting it redemptively as (to cite his title) *The Battle Cry of Freedom*. Following the lead of another historian, Brekus wonders if the title should not instead be *The Battle Cry of Freedom?* The question mark is important, she notes, because “he never asks what ‘freedom’ actually meant for the lives of the formerly enslaved.” This, I would suggest, is because he does not really want to confront the overwhelming, and ongoing, reality of racism in the white North, no less than the white South, as the tragic legacy of the Civil War. In like manner, Brekus points out a false dichotomy in McPherson’s review, when he asks “which [Stout] regards as the greater evil, slavery or total war.” For Brekus, the dichotomy is specious. “Stout is quite clear that both total war and slavery were evil.” By insisting on the overarching nobility and even romance of the war, McPherson is not prepared to face a total war that may have been as “evil” in its conduct as the palpably immoral institution of slavery.

If McPherson’s redemptive narrative of the Civil War errs on the side of a distorting patriotism, other, neoconservative critics, wishing to view my book as a referendum on the war in Iraq, stoop even lower. The outspoken neoconservative Ross Douthat is explicit in his views of war and ethics, and argues that the two have nothing to do with one another. Just war theory, the Geneva Conventions, or “rules of engagement” can be safely eschewed for the all controlling moral end of war: the survival and triumph of the nation state through whatever means are required. Even Abu Ghraib, Douthat argues, is “inevitable.” Such a Machiavellian argument is, to my eyes, beneath contempt. For Brekus, this

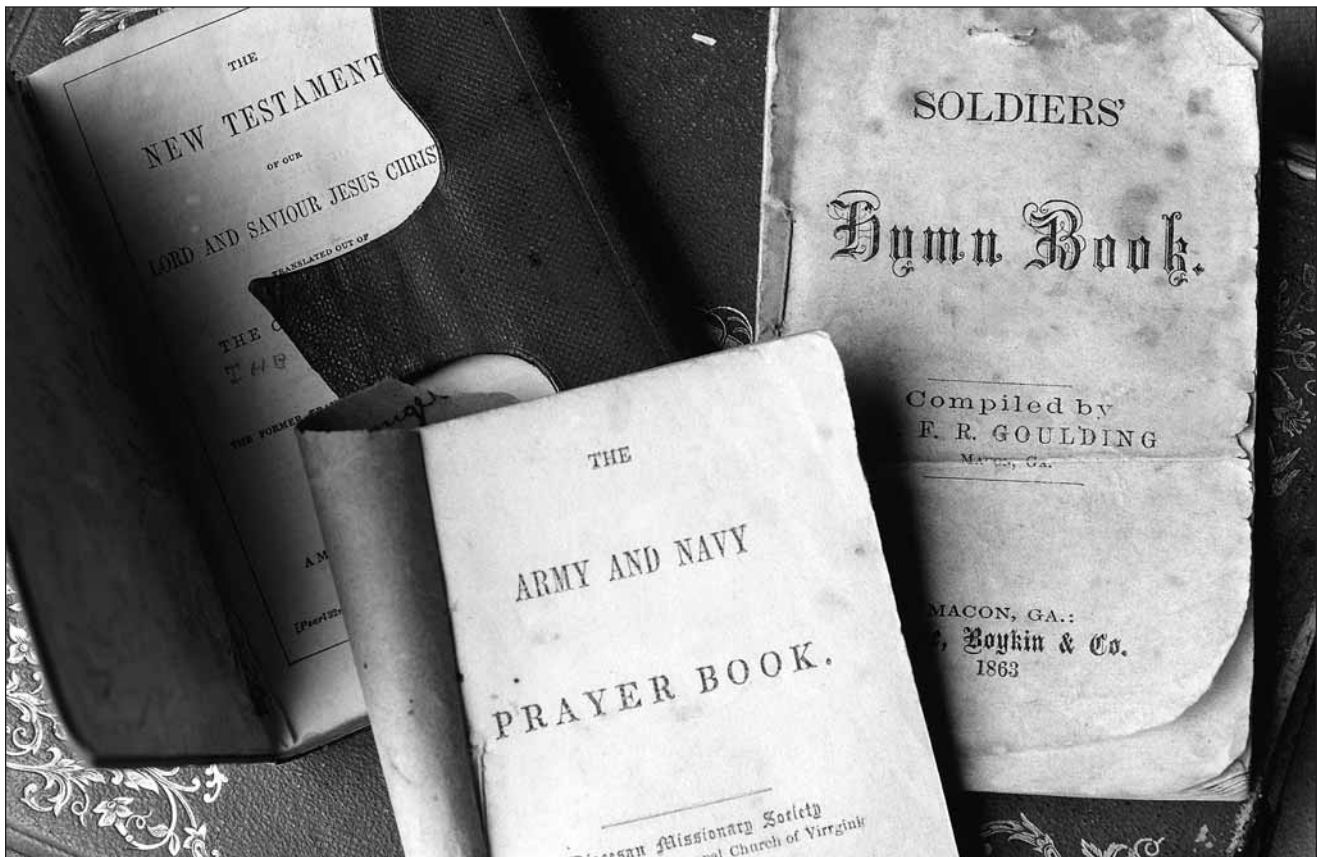
“shocking assumption of inevitability [of unjust conduct] is exactly what Stout has tried to challenge.”

As welcome as Brekus’s critique of my critics is, her substantial questions are even more discerning. In citing the earlier Stout, who published on Puritanism and the “myth of American exceptionalism,” and laying this alongside my present project, Brekus asks, When did an American civil religion really originate, with the Puritans or the Civil War? My answer is the Civil War. But note that the emphasis must be on an American civil religion, not a Puritan civil religion, or an American revolutionary civil religion, both of which contributed a vocabulary that the Civil War would incarnate into a full-blown national civil religion. Before the Civil War there were democratic states and regions, but no deep and higher identification with the nation state as something superior to particular states and regions. For that to happen, there had to be a “baptism in blood.”

Another important question Brekus raises is why I did not include the voices of slaves more fully in my book. Fair enough. Surely no one was more invested in the Civil War than the slaves, and no one had more purely abolitionist motives (as distinct from nationalistic and even imperialistic motives). In the Brauer seminar, one perceptive student asked why I didn’t include slave sermons that were delivered in the cabins and getaways on the plantation. The reason is simple: They do not exist.

But another reason why slave narratives are not conspicuous in my book is because for the most part preliberated slaves had no agency in the war, and it was the agents I especially wanted to interrogate. Where important black voices existed, say in the life of Frederick Douglass or the African American religious press, I included them. And when they served as agents on the battlefields as soldiers and sailors, I cited their heroic actions often. But the fact is, in a society that was as virulently racist—as both the North and South were—the opinions and critiques of slaves simply did not count in conducting and justifying the war; hardly anyone cared. For the slaves, of course, the primary motive and justification for the war was abolition, and in that sense, morally compelling. But the tragedy of the Civil War was that hardly anyone in white America cared. Brekus’s suggestion that I consult ex-slave narratives in the WPA interviews is

For the slaves, of course, the primary motive and justification
for the war was abolition . . .



compelling, and one I may well explore in a separate study of Civil War memory among African Americans.

If Professor Marty's critique of my book suggests that I portray Lincoln in a harsher light than Marty would like, Brekus moves my take on Lincoln in a different direction, focusing on the Second Inaugural Address, which I praise. She asks whether Lincoln's identification of the war's cause and duration with "God's will" might have injected a note of providential fatalism which, I argue, helped account for the uncritical acceptance of whatever the war brought. ("Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn from the lash shall be paid with another drawn by the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous

altogether.") Clearly this famous passage reeks of the sort of de facto fatalism that I found so determinative of the disproportional suffering. I think she is right, and I simply didn't recognize the connection here between Lincoln and the Republican Protestant clergy. What I do continue to stand by is the other clarion phrase in that brilliant address: "with malice towards none," a perspective that appeared almost unique to Lincoln, and one that would not outlive him.

Brekus's critical insight into Lincoln's fatalism prompts her to close her critique by asking for more on "Lincoln's theological interpretation of the war—an interpretation that continues to shape our historical understanding of the war today." This is where Professor Gilpin picks up in his response.

Just as Brekus compared my earlier work on the Puritan jeremiad to claims of American exceptionalism in the Civil War, so Gilpin addresses the theme of the jeremiad, but

With civil war, the celestial city came down to earth . . .

from a more strictly theological point of view. In particular, he sees in my book evidence that the Civil War marked a critical transformation of the American jeremiad in ways that are recognizably “modern” and “contemporary.”

Gilpin summarizes the “reshapings” that took place in the “theology of the jeremiad” in three ways: “providence became fatalism; chastening discipline became martyrdom; and the wilderness became consecrated ground.” I think he’s correct on all three fronts. The question of providentialism versus fatalism, with particular reference to President Lincoln, also came up with Brekus’s critique, so I will concentrate on the second two observations.

First, suffering came to be recast in the Civil War from a “chastening discipline” administered by God for his children to return to their covenant with Him, to a “martyrdom” in which massive sacrifices brought Americans to a new American covenant sanctified by the blood of the soldier-martyrs. The increasing prominence given to the language of “martyrdom,” with “martyrs” willingly sacrificing themselves on the “altar of the nation,” became unmistakably obvious to me early in the research, long before the events of 9/11. Even the title of my book was fixed before there was any national discourse on radical Islam or jihad.

Unlike many Americans who thought they were encountering this strange and fanatical discourse of martyrdom and “holy war” for the first time, I recognized that it was true of nineteenth-century Americans caught up in their own civil war, and desperate to find meaning in the incredible sacrifices their soldiers and families were asked to endure. This transformation, Gilpin rightly observes, “precipitated what might be called a crisis in the religious meaning of suffering” in which the locus of theological meaning shifted from transcendent Christianity and the individual’s spiritual transformation through suffering to a theological meaning grounded in an emerging American civil religion, where voluntary suffering for the flag marked a people’s “moral fidelity to a cause.” Increasingly, the “cause” becomes its own end, theologically no less than politically, in ways that eliminated the need for higher moral judgments.

Thirdly, and most intriguingly, Gilpin infers from my book a theological shift that I had not perceived, namely the transformation of “the Christian spiritual geography of

America.” As civil war inexorably forged a nation on the anvil of suffering, the meaning of the place called America shifted from the Puritan “wilderness”—a frightening and primitive opposite to their settled Christianity that believers had to turn their backs on—to a promised land consecrated by the blood of the martyrs. In place of a wilderness sojourn en route to a celestial city, a place that required spiritual self-interrogation and moral criticism, a new consecrated ground emerged in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, whereby the blood of the martyrs insured that hereafter America’s wilderness would be transformed by “these honored dead,” compelling Americans everywhere and forever to “resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom; and that this government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” With civil war, the celestial city came down to earth, forever blessed by, in Gilpin’s words, “a founding act of violence.” In the new eschatology forged on the anvil of civil war, America, and not Christ, would lead the world into millennial bliss.

Finally, Gilpin moves beyond the strict purview of my book to ask a critical question: How did a North and South with two violently competing, Christian-based civil religions, come together? That question is answered brilliantly in David Blight’s book *Race and Reunion*, in which he recovers (white) Americans’ “memory” of the Civil War in the fifty years after Appomattox. Blight reveals a chilling pattern whereby white northerners and southerners came together through a widely shared “white supremacist vision” that “could not have been achieved without the resubjugation of many of those people whom the war had freed from centuries of bondage. This is the tragedy lingering on the margins and infesting the heart of American history from Appomattox to World War I.” Since there was never a genuine moral commitment to the equality of blacks, beyond a few heroic dissenting voices, it is not surprising to Blight that white Northerners and Southerners found their unity in the common slaughter of the war itself, rather than in the emancipation of the slaves.

In summary, the Brauer Seminar taught me something about my book that I had intuited but never fully realized before, namely that current agendas of patriotism and war

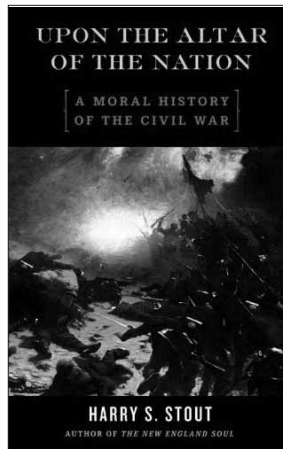
. . . current agendas of patriotism and war can shape scholarly discourse . . .

can shape scholarly discourse in ways that often bear little resemblance to the central argument they are addressing. Nowhere is this more true than in the literature of the Civil War. The Civil War was not only the central political event of American history, but the central moral and rhetorical event as well. It bequeathed a rhetoric of “freedom” and “democracy” that could overlay any war, no matter how unjust and imperialistic, with the patina of a noble adventure where good will triumph over evil. Unfortunately, this rhetoric extends to some Civil War historians and neoconservative pundits who will lend a battle cry to any American war, as long as it invokes liberation as its cause. But not all historians are so unreserved in their praise of war, and I remain most grateful to the Brauer Seminar for demonstrating this.

Endnotes from Stout

1. In the index to *Battle Cry of Freedom*, McPherson lists myriad references to slavery and emancipation, but the word “racism” does not appear.

2. David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 2–3.



Continued from page 7

Endnotes from Brekus

1. Walt Whitman, *Memoranda During the War* (Camden, N.J., author's publication, 1875–76), 5. This text is available online: <http://www.classroomelectric.org/volume2/price/memoranda/memoranda.htm> [accessed June 15, 2006].
2. Harry Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006), xii.
3. *Ibid*, 415.
4. *Ibid*, xvii.
5. *Ibid*, 341.
6. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
7. Michal P. Johnson, “Battle Cry of Freedom?” *Reviews in American History* 17, no. 2 (June, 1989): 218.
8. Sherman quoted in Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, 460.
9. James McPherson, “Was it a Just War?” *New York Review of Books* 53, no. 5 (March 23, 2006): 18.
10. Ross Douthat, “The North, the South, and God,” *Policy Review* 135 (February and March 2006). Available online at <http://policyreview.org>.
11. Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Remarks were delivered on Monday, May 1, 2006 in Swift Lecture Hall.





THE UNIVERSITY OF
 CHICAGO
DIVINITY SCHOOL

Swift Hall
1025 East 58th Street
Chicago, Illinois 60637-1577

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Chicago, Illinois
Permit No. 8086

CRITERION