

Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction

Valarie H. Ziegler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Ziegler, Valarie H. (2006) "Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol8/iss2/22>

Review

Ziegler, Valarie H.

Spring 2006

Blum, Edward J., editor and Poole, W. Scott, editor. *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction*. Mercer University Press, \$29.00 ISBN 865549877

A Neglected Study

Religion and the Civil War Era

As the editors note in their introduction, the purpose of this anthology, published in 2005, is to explore dimensions of the Southern experience of Reconstruction that historians have typically left to theologians. Recognizing that religion was a key social and intellectual construct in Southern life before and after the Civil War, the editors present **Vale of Tears** on page 3 as a work that, in taking religious institutions and language seriously, will help transform the study of Reconstruction by breaking down barriers between history, religious studies, literary criticism, cultural studies, and anthropology.

These are important aims. As Beth Barton Schweiger observed in the Summer, 1998, edition of *Religion and American Culture*, scholars have developed highly sophisticated studies of New England religious thought since Perry Miller began his ground-breaking work on Puritanism, but considerations of Southern religion have focused on the social and cultural history of race and slavery rather than on intellectual history. Theology, however, provided a common language that shaped and expressed Southerners' worldview across lines of race, gender, and class. Thus, as Schweiger concluded, it remains an open question whether a mature literature on religious history can be written without a foundation in intellectual and theological ideas.

Vale of Tears is an attempt to produce such scholarship. Taking religious ideas seriously allows historians to study Southern life through a lens that Southerners themselves valued and utilized. Fluency in the history of Christian doctrine enables scholars not only to analyze Southern thought and rhetoric with

sophistication; it also equips scholars to recognize significant variations and developments over time. Particularly since scholars of American religions have, in the last twenty years, developed increased concern for social and cultural history, the willingness of historians to examine religious language carefully offers hope for valuable cross-fertilization between historians in religious studies departments and those in history departments.

Most of the authors represented in this anthology are employed in college or university departments of history. Many cite as foundational for the study of Southern religion the work of Eugene Genovese, Charles Reagan Wilson, and Paul Harvey. Harvey himself contributed an article to this collection, and Wilson wrote the foreword. Editors Blum and Poole provide a useful and concise introduction that not only makes a case for the importance of considering religion and Reconstruction but also offers clear summaries of the thesis and significance of each of the twelve chapters. The book itself has five sections: the first examines the ways in which violence and segregation were sanctioned in the Reconstruction era; the second considers African Americans' use of religion to resist white supremacy; the third looks at religious rhetoric, politics and moral reform; the fourth considers post-Civil War Catholicism; and the fifth considers cultures of Reconstruction by examining Grant's funeral and the theology of white supremacy in the works of Thomas Dixon, Jr.

Readers will find much of interest here. W. Scott Poole's essay on theology and violence in the Reconstruction South demonstrates ways in which the rhetoric of apocalyptic literature—most famously delineated in the New Testament book of Revelation—provided a rationale for violent resistance to Federal policies as well as a romantic wrapping for the terrorist activities of the Ku Klux Klan. An essay by Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr., on racial segregation in the Episcopal Church after the war complements articles by David T. Gleeson and Kent A. McConnell on developments in American Catholicism during the war and its aftermath. Paul Harvey and Edward J. Blum show how African Americans used the language of theology to celebrate the abolition of slavery, to legitimate their efforts to attain political power, and to protest the many ways in which Reconstruction Americans resisted racial equality. Those familiar with Puritan studies and radical abolitionism will recognize the continuation of the jeremiad tradition of the prophetic denunciation of sin here.

Unfortunately, the authors do not draw such specific parallels, which suggests, as the editors concede in their introduction, that the natural connections

between the prior work of religious historians and the work of these authors remain to be more fully explored. Another area which receives little attention here is the religious experience of Southern women, though Kimberly R. Kellison contributes a chapter on sexuality, violence, and religion in upcountry South Carolina. Kellison argues that white evangelical males responded to the disorder of Reconstructionism by attempting to reassert their dominance through controlling women's sexuality and by using violence against freed men. But even Kellison's consideration of gender offers little insight into how women of either race used religion to understand their own Reconstruction experiences.

A final area in which future studies of this type would profit is from a wider consideration of secondary sources. These authors document their work assiduously, but they have in many cases failed to cite sources that would have been foundational to historians in religious studies department writing on similar topics. No one, for example, cites articles from *The Journal of Southern Religion*, *The Journal of Religion and American Culture*, *Church History*, *The Journal of Church and State*, or *The Journal of Presbyterian History*. Yet several authors discuss issues like the spirituality of the church and the work of Benjamin Palmer, a prominent Southern Presbyterian minister who helped pioneer the notion of slavery as a Christian vocation prior to the war, and segregation of the races as a Christian calling during Reconstruction. Religious historians have long recognized Palmer as an architect of the spirituality of the church, and excellent studies of his construal of this concept by Richard T. Hughes have been available since 1983. This anthology would have benefited greatly from such expertise.

The study of American history, in short, demands an extraordinary range of knowledge. **Vale of Tears** reveals just how much historians of America and of American religious history have to offer one another. Indeed, **Vale of Tears** does more than that; it also offers an excellent example of the importance of interdisciplinary approaches. Laura J. Veltman's concluding chapter on Thomas Dixon, Jr., examines the ways in which Dixon incorporated a distinctive theology of white supremacy into his popular fiction such as *The Leopard's Spots* and his highly influential *The Clansman*. Several studies, such as Michl Barkun's 1994 *Religion and the Racist Right*, and the 1999 *Eve and Adam* by Kristen Kvam, Linda Schearing, and myself, have traced the nineteenth-century development of this theology, which postulated two separate creations of humanity, with only white people being descended from Eve and Adam, the superior of the two original seed lines. This theology is critical to contemporary racist groups such

as the Aryan Nations; but to my knowledge, no other scholar has ever demonstrated how it informed Dixon's literary works. Since the critical film *Birth of a Nation* was an adaptation of Dixon's *The Clansman*, Laura Veltman has done her readers a great service in showing the theological origins of Dixon's (and the film's) memorable animalistic portrayal of African Americans. Just as scholars in religious studies and in history departments can learn from one another, so can they profit from the insights provided by literary studies.

Essays such as Veltman's fully justify the editors' thesis that the study of religious history and ideas is critical to our understanding of the Civil War and its legacy.

Valarie H. Ziegler teaches in the religious studies department at DePauw University. Reviews in American History called her first book, The Advocates of Peace in Antebellum America, the most important study of antislavery since Aileen Kraditor's Means and Ends in Abolitionism; Diva Julia, her biography of Julia Ward Howe, won the 2002 Trinity Prize for an author who offers new perspectives on biblical, cultural, ethical, theological or religious issues and whose cross-disciplinary writing has broad application for a general audience. She may be contacted at Vziegler@depauw.edu.