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Interview

CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW GOD'S ALMOST CHOSEN PEOPLES: A RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Rable, George C.

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Interview with George C. Rable, Professor and holder of the Summersell Chair in Southern History at the University of Alabama

Interviewed by Nathan A. Buman

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Civil War Book Review (CWBR): I'm here today with George Rable, author of *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War*. Professor Rable, thank you so much for joining me.

George Rable (GR): My pleasure.

CWBR: You seem to give a very even-handed treatment of as many religions as possible in addition to looking at soldiers and the homefront, men and women, and white and black. How important was it for you to include this balance throughout your religious history of the Civil War?

GR: Well my purpose was to write a comprehensive religious history of the war and I must admit, as the project proceeded, I was approached by a number of people asking me: "is my group going to be included" or "is my group going to be included," so I was under a little bit of pressure even as I was working on the project but I thought if it was going to be a religious history of the war it should include as many groups as possible including non-believers.

CWBR: So often we focus on what made the North and South dissimilar. Does a recognition of an "American" understanding of the war through religious avenues bring northerners and southerners together in this narrative; at the end of the day were they really very different religiously?

GR: I think religiously, in some ways, they were not very different. They both used similar religious frameworks to interpret the causes, course, and consequences of the war. They both put a great deal of emphasis on providence and judgment to explain what was happening to them and what was happening to their enemies as far as that goes. So I think studying religion actually does somewhat narrow the differences between the two sides though obviously I think they would disagree with that.

CWBR: I was especially struck by your discussion of some of the Mormons in the West too who wondered about the South believing that God fought on their side and, at the same time the North did, and if both sides were correct that would lead to total annihilation. How did they reconcile that fact?

GR: well I'm not sure they saw that particular contradiction or at least most people didn't see it. Occasionally you'll get comments from people saying "well you know the other side is praying just as hard as we are, that may present a problem." More commonly, the assumption was that the Lord could not possibly allow their enemies to win, or could not possibly allow their country to fall, could not allow the Union to be destroyed, could not allow the Confederacy to be subjugated.

CWBR: You seem to suggest a new point of contention, the split of northern Methodists and southern Methodists, and the Baptists as well in leading to secession. How did these splits help to affect the coming of the Civil War, and looking forward then, how did the North-South split of these denominations influence post-war churches? Was it a legitimate and long-lasting influence for them?

GR: Well both Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun thought that the divisions of the churches were quite ominous in the 1840s leading up to the heightened sectional conflict of the Civil War itself and I think that they were right. Now I'm not sure one would argue that the split in the churches was a cause of the war; it was more a symptom of sectional tensions over slavery than anything else. And of course the Presbyterians had split earlier and they did not split primarily over slavery. But the fact that the churches are divided at the beginning of the war certainly does not lend any encouragement to sectional compromise. In fact, one of the more interesting things I discovered in the research were the comments of Catholic editors who pointed out that "well this is what you get when you have a

Protestant nation, when you have schism and division." If you had had a Catholic nation there would have been no sectional conflict and Civil War; the church universal would have been able to take care of that particular problem. Now in terms of long-lasting impact, obviously these religious divisions persisted a long time among the Methodists, the Presbyterians, and of course the Baptists are still divided to this day.

CWBR: For a nation that was so seemingly well-churched in the antebellum period, why do we see the debauchery and casting away of church services in camp during the early months of the war?

GR: Well they're heavily churched but also remember that probably only a minority of Americans were actually members of churches in part because the bar of church membership was pretty high at that time especially in some of the evangelical denominations. On a typical Sunday you might have many more people in attendance than actual members of the congregation so I think that's a factor. Plus you're talking about young men and these are not the most religious segment of the population, usually in that time or in our own, and plus these are young men removed from the influences of home and family and so it's not surprising that under the stresses of camp life and battle and war in general you would find a great deal of what the people of the time would certainly describe as absolute debauchery. Although I suspect they exaggerated the degree of that from time to time so it's interesting. I think many of the more devout soldiers are absolutely convinced that a lot of their comrades are heathenish and I sort of take them at their word.

CWBR: As January of 1863 rolls around, President Lincoln officially calls into order the Emancipation Proclamation. I wonder how this altered the message delivered by the southern clergy and, in turn, the message being given by the northern clergy to northerners on the homefront?

GR: Well let's start with the northern clergy first. Many of the northern clergy had been pushing for such a measure all along. The northern clergy of course had been divided, some of the more conservative denominations like the old school Presbyterians had not been especially eager to embrace abolition or emancipation, but once Lincoln issues that final proclamation even the more conservative churches come around. They naturally interpret the war itself and the fact that war has continued, a lot of them interpreted, as God's judgment on slavery and once you cast off, what one minister called the Jonah of slavery,

maybe the Lord would bless the nation with victory. So again it's interpreted as this sort of cycle of sin and judgment and then redemption. The southern clergy continually embraced the institution of slavery during the war as the biblically sanctioned institution. What changes for the southern clergy during the war is that the southern clergy become increasingly critical of the behavior of slaveholders. In other words, slavery is not sinful in and of itself, in the fact that they scripturally sanctioned institution, but they become increasingly critical of the behavior of slaveholders for breaking up slave families through sale, for neglecting the religious instruction of the slaves, for not teaching slaves to read so that they were unable to read the scriptures. So there's a kind of reform movement that takes place during the war; the southern clergy advocate reform of the institution of slavery. I don't think they see this reform as leading to abolition and it's interesting, however, that this reform gets absolutely nowhere. Not a single one of these measures even reaches the floor of the state legislature or the Confederate congress; there's some consideration committee, but that's it.

CWBR: As the war progresses, you speak increasingly of the revivalism that takes place throughout some of the southern armies but you suggest that it's less common among the western armies in the Confederacy and I wonder is it too much of an oversimplification to wonder if this fact helps explain the consistency of the Army of Northern Virginia and the canonization of the Army of Northern Virginia in Civil War memory?

GR: I think it certainly helps explain part of the canonization of the Army of Northern Virginia in the Civil War memory. Now if we could ask Stonewall Jackson that question, I think he would certainly say the revivals would mark a blessing of God, not only on the soldiers, but on the army itself. And I think you could certainly argue that religion is quite important in sustaining the morale of armies but also keep in mind that there were revivals in the western armies as well they just came a little bit later and perhaps with less intensity and I think less organization.

CWBR: What does the study of religion say about Confederate nationalism and also war support or war weariness in the North?

GR: Well I think religion is important part of Confederate nationalism. In fact, you see such intense civil religion on both sides; you have presidents proclaiming days of fasting, humiliation, and prayer; presidents declaring official days of thanksgiving after victories; you have countless sermons preached and

published on both sides on these special occasions as well as other occasions. And I think religion is an important component of Confederate nationalism and it's also an important component of American nationalism in general. I don't think the old thesis that somehow southerners were guilt-ridden and lost the will to fight and thought that God had turned against them really holds a great deal of water. I think that there's this persistent belief that God will somehow save them, even at the last moment.

CWBR: Spending so much time with this topic, would you maybe suggest that the war changed America's outlook on religion or did their religious beliefs and spiritual outlook change their interpretation of the war as they were fighting it?

GR: Well I think religious interpretation shaped their interpretation of the war, there's no question about that. When you interpret battles in terms of divine favor and divine chastisement I don't think there's much doubt about that. How much the war actually itself changed religious beliefs, of course, is a very difficult and complex question and I think a very debatable one. Historians over the years have tended to emphasize a kind of disillusionment in the aftermath of war, a disillusionment in civil religion, though they focus most of their attention on intellectuals. It seems to me that most Americans, northerners and southerners in the aftermath of this war, sought to rebuild their lives obviously in every way you can conceive and sought to rebuild their spiritual life as well and rebuild their church lives, and were not so much interested any more in looking back at the issues of the war but they were simply interested in rebuilding their religious lives. And I must say I do not see the same amount of religious disillusionment in the aftermath of this war that some other historians have argued for.

CWBR: Would you maybe suggest that the religious fervor and the rate at which Americans used religion to cope with the conflict, is that unique to the American Civil War or might this simply be a traditional wartime response for any people?

GR: I think the way religion was used during the Civil War, if not unique, was certainly more intense than any other war. I know, at one point in the book, I do say that the American Civil War was the holiest war in American history and I certainly can't think of any other war in which religion played such a large role. Now obviously religion came into play in the American Revolution; religion comes into play in the War of 1812, the Mexican War, World War I, World War

II, etc. but not nearly in the pervasive and all-encompassing sort of way as it did during the American Civil War. I think it was a confluence of a lot of things, first of all, the Civil War itself was unique in the annals of American war and, secondly, it comes at a time of great religious expansion and fervor in America in general.

CWBR: Lastly, and we touched on some of this earlier, I've always been struck by the influence of Lee and Jackson's piety on post-Civil War memory. How did their religious beliefs influence their role in the Lost Cause mentality and why don't we find more of a sense of the Union generals' piety in post-Civil War memory?

GR: Well I think their religion was very important in Lost Cause memory because Lee and Jackson become kind of the ultimate Christian martyrs. In fact Jackson's death leads to all kinds of soul-searching about why the Lord had taken Jackson away from the Confederacy just when they needed him most. And many pious Confederates simply concluded that, first of all, they might not be able to understand why God had done that and, secondly, perhaps they had put too much faith in Jackson or, as they put, it "too much faith in an arm of flesh" and God was punishing them for that reason. Now I suppose the flip answer to why religion has not been as important in the memory of northern soldiers is, perhaps, that the more pious northern soldiers were not nearly as successful in the battlefield as Lee and Jackson. O. O. Howard who probably, in some ways, is the ultimate Christian soldier in the North had a very rocky career in the eastern theater and a somewhat more successful career in the western theater. George McClellan, I must say somewhat to my surprise, was remarkably religious as well and wrote things that could have easily been written by Robert E. Lee. General Rosecrans was a very devout Catholic who loved to stay up late into the night discussing theology with various people including James Garfield, the future president of the United States. So I think there are certainly Christian generals on the northern side as well, but they just weren't as successful as Lee and Jackson were.

CWBR: Professor Rable, thank you so much for joining me and taking the time to discuss your recent book, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War*.

GR: It's been my pleasure.