

In 'God's almost chosen peoples,' UA historian explores religion in Civil War

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Amid the horrendous slaughter of the Civil War, people from all denominations turned to their faith to explain and justify the causes for which they fought – and to find reasons for pressing on. A new book by a University of Alabama professor takes up this essential topic in American history, 150 years after the start of the war.

“Many Americans interpreted the causes and the course and the consequences of the war in religious terms,” said Dr. George C. Rable, Charles G. Summersell Chair in Southern History at UA. “Religion was an important part of their motivation, it’s an important part of sustaining the war effort, and it helped people justify the horrendous sacrifices that the war required.

“It is a source of morale and a source of meaning. This is war beyond what anyone could imagine in the spring of 1861 when it began. People asked themselves, ‘why did all this carnage occur? What did it mean? Should the war continue? To what end?’ And they sought answers in religion.”

Rable’s book is titled “God’s Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War,” published by the University of North Carolina Press. Publishers Weekly, in a starred review, stated that the book is “brilliant and groundbreaking ... Rable’s engrossing study of the role of religion in the Civil War will stand as the definitive religious history of America’s most divisive conflict.”

Rable researched and wrote this volume over the course of nine years; he relied extensively on primary sources, including journals, politicians' letters and denominational records. Of particular interest to Rable were the many published sermons from preachers in a variety of denominations and religious newspapers, which published many articles about the war.

"The number of published sermons is staggering," Rable said. "The religious press actively commented on the war in a variety of ways. Pacifist Quaker editors, for example, might try to ignore the war, though some got into trouble for putting war news in their papers."

Ideas about sin, divine providence and judgment pervaded religious tracts and discussions of the time, Rable said. Both Northerners and Southerners believed that God was on their side, and that divine providence favored their efforts. In fact, the Civil War can be seen in part as a conflict over biblical interpretation – what did the Bible say about slavery and God's will?

"As far as the pro-slavery people were concerned, they had the Bible on their side," Rable said. "They could cite chapter and verse, whereas the anti-slavery people had to appeal more to the spirit of the Gospels. In many cases, it became a very technical argument over the translation of Hebrew and Greek words. A lot of arid treatises were produced on slavery in the Bible. One of the things that makes religion so vital to the understanding of the war is that it was very important to both sides. It was very easy for people to claim that God was on their side."

As the war grew more horrific and the fortunes of each side waxed and waned, preachers and other believers began seeing the war as a kind of judgment, either against the sin of slavery or for some other misdeeds.

"The Confederates thought they were being punished not for holding

slaves but for not doing it in the right way – for splitting up families, for not teaching slaves how to read the Bible, for not providing religious instruction, for cruel treatment – that sort of thing,” Rable said. “Slavery was fine according to their way of thinking, but individual slaveholders had been guilty of essentially violating divine law and not treating their slaves properly.

“For anti-slavery people, the war is a judgment against the sin of slavery. But the war might also be a judgment on other transgressions. Preachers were very good at listing all the sins the nation was guilty of, both individually and collectively, including the treatment of the Indians, alcohol, gambling and swearing.”

Rable’s book encompasses a wide range of religious expression in the United States at the time, including Roman Catholicism, Mormonism and African-American religion. Roman Catholics had their own conflicted attitudes toward the war, as expressed in the Roman Catholic press at the time.

“The Catholic position is fascinating,” he said. “First of all there’s a range of opinion. You don’t have published Catholic sermons, but the Catholic press says at the beginning, if this were a Catholic nation, this war wouldn’t be happening. With the Protestants, you have schism and division, and the sectional conflict is the logical result of Protestantism. Their argument was that the Catholic Church could be a source of unity for the nation, and Catholics, both North and South, tended to be much more moderate. Northern Catholics ran the gamut from pro-slavery to anti-slavery.”

“God’s Almost Chosen People” also contains many anecdotes that illustrate how religion played an essential part in the war. For example, swearing was a big issue – Stonewall Jackson, Rable noted, believed that God would not bless soldiers in battle if they went in swearing. But the

war helped forge bonds across sectarian lines as well. For example, Rable recounts the experiences of the Rev. Joseph Twichell, a congregational minister, and Father Joseph B. O'Hagan, a Jesuit priest, who were thrown together as chaplains in a New York regiment.

“The two young chaplains not only concluded a treaty of amity, peace and cooperation but soon became fast friends,” Rable said. “While Twichell still worried about a priest placing himself between a dying man and [God](#), he saw that O'Hagan had reasonable views on matters of [faith](#). For his part, Twichell sounded increasingly less dogmatic about the truths of Protestantism. One cold night, shortly after the Battle of Fredericksburg, they lay down to sleep, putting their blankets together to stay warm. O'Hagan began laughing, confiding to Twichell how the situation amused him – a Jesuit priest and a New England puritan minister of the worst sort lying close together under the same blanket. ‘I wonder what the angels think.’ He quickly answered his own question: ‘I think they like it.’”

Rable noted that despite the extensive scope of his volume, the subject of religion during the [Civil War](#) remains so vast that still more materials await researchers.

“One of the problems with the project is that there’s material on religion everywhere,” he said. “I still run across new information. I never tired of researching it and writing about it, and there’s still much work to be done on the subject.

More information: uncpress.unc.edu/browse/book_detail?title_id=1768

Provided by University of Alabama

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