



America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln

By Mark A. Noll

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Religious life in early America is often equated with the fire-and-brimstone Puritanism best embodied by the theology of Cotton Mather. Yet, by the nineteenth century, American theology had shifted dramatically away from the severe European traditions directly descended from the Protestant Reformation, of which Puritanism was in the United States the most influential. In its place arose a singularly American set of beliefs. In *America's God*, Mark Noll has written a biography of this new American ethos. In the 125 years preceding the outbreak of the Civil War, theology played an extraordinarily important role in American public and private life. Its evolution had a profound impact on America's self-definition. The changes taking place in American theology during this period were marked by heightened spiritual inwardness, a new confidence in individual reason, and an attentiveness to the economic and market realities of Western life. Vividly set in the social and political events of the age, *America's God* is replete with the figures who made up the early American intellectual landscape, from theologians such as Jonathan Edwards, Nathaniel W. Taylor, William Ellery Channing, and Charles Hodge and religiously inspired writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catherine Stowe to dominant political leaders of the day like Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. The contributions of these thinkers combined with the religious revival of the 1740s, colonial warfare with France, the consuming struggle for independence, and the rise of evangelical Protestantism to form a common intellectual coinage based on a rising republicanism and commonsense principles. As this Christian republicanism affirmed itself, it imbued in dedicated Christians a conviction that the Bible supported their beliefs over those of all others. Tragically, this sense of religious purpose set the stage for the Civil War, as the conviction of Christians both North and South that God was on their side served to deepen a schism that would soon rend the young nation asunder. Mark Noll has given us the definitive history of Christian theology in America from the time of Jonathan Edwards to the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. It is a story of a flexible and creative theological energy that over time forged a guiding national ideology the legacies of which remain with us to this day.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This "social history of theology" in America, from the colonial era through the Civil War, promises to reshape the way we think about American religion, and, indeed, American history. Noll, who teaches history at evangelicalism's premier liberal arts college, Wheaton, charts the changes and developments in American theology, but he does not approach this potentially technical and narrow topic from the fusty perspective of old-fashioned intellectual history. Rather, he embeds theology in American society, showing how, *inter alia*, printing presses, legislatures and war shaped, and were shaped by, theology. His gauntlet-throwing argument is that American theology (by which he means primarily Protestant theology) is markedly different from European theology. A specifically American evangelicalism, he contends, was forged during the Revolution and early Republic. Noll's story ends with the Civil War, which he claims reveals a "theological tragedy": the contradictions and complications of this distinctly American religion were exposed when, in war, the American project proved wanting. Noll's hints of the "post-Protestant, even post-Christian" post-bellum America will leave readers hoping for a sequel. Although this magnum opus will be of interest primarily to scholars, it could certainly be appreciated by a larger audience. Noll's trademark clarity-both in analysis and in prose-is in evidence here; unlike many academics, he does not make the reader hunt and strain to find (and follow) his argument. Equally obvious is Noll's erudite mastery of everything from Puritan ecclesiology to Scottish moral philosophy. This is, finally, the magisterial work that has long been expected from one of our leading historians.

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From Library Journal

Noll (Christian thought, Wheaton Coll.) is a well-recognized historian and author of American religious history. Here, he closely examines pre-Civil War American religion, showing that it was a unique synthesis of republicanism, commonsense moral reasoning, and evangelical Christianity. The antebellum United States was a society uniquely preoccupied with biblical religion, but American religion also reflected the prevailing sentiments and political preoccupations of secular society. Noll brings to light some lesser-known theological thinkers while also reexamining the more famous figures of the time, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, Thomas Jefferson, and Jonathan Edwards. Carefully documented and including an excellent bibliography, this insightful volume makes a useful contribution to the study of religion in America. It is not aimed at the general public but is unusually readable for such a scholarly book. Recommended for academic and large public libraries.

C. Robert Nixon, M.L.S., Lafayette, IN

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Review

"Essential reading for anyone interested in American history, politics and religion."-- *Themelios*

"America's God deserves to be hailed as the most comprehensive treatment of early American religious thought. But it is far more than that, since Mr. Noll is tracking here not only the rise and fall of American theology but also the genesis of American civilization...Mr. Noll laments the passing of Christian republicanism and in the end suggests that a dose of Jonathan Edwards ('the last of the Puritans and the first

of the evangelicals') may be just what contemporary America needs. You do not have to agree with that assessment to appreciate this fine book, which brings some of the nation's greatest thinkers very much alive."--*Wall Street Journal*

"Noll belongs to a talented group of historians who have transformed our understanding of American evangelicalism. Among Noll's many great strengths (all on display in this immense work) is his comparative method, based on wide learning in Protestant sources worldwide."--*Times Literary Supplement*

"Carefully documented and including an excellent bibliography, this insightful volume makes a useful contribution to the study of religion in America"--*Library Journal*

"For academics--historians, theologians, and anyone else interested in the history of political thought, religion, philosophy, or theology--this book is essential reading"--*The Cresset Epiphany/Lent*

"Mark Noll's *America's God* delineates the Americanization of an Old World Protestantism with a breadth, learning, and sophistication unmatched by any other historian. Noll uncovers hidden, obscure figures even as he breathes new life into seemingly familiar names. Those who think intellectual history is dead or irrelevant will be jolted by the wondrous vigor of this exceptional, synoptic book. There's nothing else like it."--Jon Butler, author of *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*

"Likely to remain definitive for years to come."--*Anglican and Episcopal History*

"*America's God* is a richly rewarding work. Awesomely researched and beautifully written, Mark Noll's magisterial study embeds American religious thought from the late Colonial era through the Civil War in its cultural and political context. Not only historians of religion, but everyone interested in the ideas and beliefs that shaped America's past--and still remain potent today--will profit from this insightful interpretive study."--Paul S. Boyer, Editor-in-Chief, *The Oxford Companion to United States History*

"Noll's book is the most comprehensive study of religious ideas in America that we have, and a work that makes the most sustained case for the impact of the spiritual on American public life. The book is original and well argued; and the research is impeccable. Some will not agree with Noll's arguments but everyone interested in religious thought will have to consider them."--Bruce Kuklick, author of *A History of Philosophy in America: 1720-2000*

"This 'social history of theology' in America, from the colonial era through the Civil War, promises to reshape the way we think about American religion, and, indeed, American history...Noll's trademark clarity--

both in analysis and in prose--is in evidence here...Equally obvious is Noll's erudite mastery of everything from Puritan ecclesiology to Scottish moral philosophy. This is, finally, the magisterial work that has long been expected from one of our leading historians."--*Publishers Weekly*

"A broadly based and solid account of the surprising evolution of Christian theology in America during the golden age of Protestant evangelicalism. Mark Noll's magnum opus is a notable achievement of Christian and historical scholarship."--Daniel Walker Howe, Rhodes Professor of American History, Oxford University

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Carlos White:

Have you spare time for just a day? What do you do when you have far more or little spare time? Yeah, you can choose the suitable activity intended for spend your time. Any person spent their own spare time to take a move, shopping, or went to the Mall. How about open or maybe read a book entitled America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln? Maybe it is to be best activity for you. You realize beside you can spend your time with your favorite's book, you can smarter than before. Do you agree with their opinion or you have different opinion?

Christopher McCrady:

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