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The Religious Revival: Narratives of Religious Origin in US Culture

Claudia Stokes

Founding the Fathers: Early Church History and Protestant Professors in Nineteenth-Century America. By Elizabeth A. Clark. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. 576 pages. \$69.95 (cloth).

Homeland Mythology: Biblical Narratives in American Culture. By Christopher Collins. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008. 288 pages. \$32.95 (cloth).

The administration of George W. Bush ushered in a new era of public religious discourse. Before the 2000 election, a politician's religion generally remained in the shadowy recesses of private life, politely referenced only as metonymic evidence attesting to his or her strong moral foundation and character. The presidential campaigns of George W. Bush moved religious rhetoric from the political margins to the center, by speaking openly about the effects of his midlife conversion to Christianity and by using coded religious language to mobilize conservative Christian voters. This explicit inclusion of religious rhetoric has dramatically changed the texture of American politicking, with professions of religious piety increasingly requisite for candidates of both parties and with Republicans embracing the hard-line fundamentalist positions that had heretofore been regarded chiefly as curiosities of the American religious fringe. The constitutional divide between religion and politics—a position long embraced by the conservative Southern Baptist Convention and legitimized by Christian scripture in Jesus's assertion that believers should "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21)—has fallen into disfavor in the last decade, as with the February 2012 remark of former senator Rick Santorum that this division once caused him to want to "throw up."¹

The consequences of this cultural sea change are many, but one is the renewed interest in religion in American studies, evident in the proliferation of panels and papers on religious subjects at the annual meetings in recent

years of the American Studies Association as well as the 2007 special issue of *American Quarterly* on religion and politics. Religion has rarely seemed timelier as a subject of scholarly inquiry, and this sudden relevance has attracted numerous scholars new to the field but whose lack of specialized training in the nuances of American religion may undermine the integrity of their work. The two publications reviewed here demonstrate the new appeal of American religion as a subject of interdisciplinary study as well as the particular challenges that scholars newer to American religious studies may encounter. These publications also demonstrate that we would be well advised to be skeptical of widespread current media portrayals of American Christianity as homogeneous and uniform, for it is just as historically constituted and varied as other cultural formations; sound scholarship must not only consider Christian belief and practice within contexts but also adumbrate the significance of those contexts.

The influence of the Bush administration in revitalizing the study of American religion is evident in Christopher Collins's *Homeland Mythology: Biblical Narratives in American Culture*, which considers the continuing usage of biblical narrative in American nationalist rhetoric. Throughout his career, the literary scholar Collins has specialized in cognitive poetics, examining the processes of perception and intellectual engagement that operate in oral texts such as Homer's *Iliad*, and *Homeland Mythology* thus constitutes a significant departure from Collins's prior research in its consideration of the grounding of American politics and culture in religious narrative. According to Collins, the United States understands itself as charged with fulfilling divine prophesies and establishing the "glorious kingdom" anticipated in the New Testament's book of Revelation (ix). *Homeland Mythology's* seven chapters consider the enduring legacies in American culture of particular features of biblical narrative, among them the expectation of divine punishment, the thematics of abduction and redemption, and the recurring metaphor of night to characterize periods of religious ignorance or anticipation. Scholars of American culture will recognize that there is nothing particularly new about this assertion that biblical precedent provides justification for American exceptionalism and self-regard, for such august scholars as Sacvan Bercovitch, Alan Heimert, and Perry Miller took up that very subject long ago, producing some of the founding works of interdisciplinary American studies.² But what differentiates Collins's study is his contention that the Bush administration took explicit advantage of this enduring religious rhetoric to justify questionable policies and decisions, such as the decision to invade Iraq in a preemptive act of self-defense from as-yet-unfound weapons of mass destruction. There is little doubt that Collins is

correct in placing the Bush administration in the chronicle of public uses of American religious typology, but the takeaway remains unclear; if American religious exceptionalism is so deeply embedded in the culture, as Collins seeks to show, then why is the Bush administration's enlistment of this rhetoric particularly noteworthy?

Homeland Mythology is hampered by several methodological problems. Collins's work in the cognitive processes of the literary imagination is at the fore of the study, and while his daring in switching fields is certainly admirable, he often provides lengthy narratological explanations, which often include graphs and diagrams, to defend positions that have long been accepted in American studies and literary studies more generally. For instance, he contends that cultures embrace and circulate narratives because their contents are in some way meaningful to that culture. This idea, which generally goes by the name "ideology," has been a mainstay of the humanities for decades. Such defenses of basic disciplinary heuristics often give the impression that *Homeland Mythology* is reinventing the wheel or, worse, that it is disengaged from the methods of the fields to which Collins is contributing.

In the several years that have elapsed since its publication, the book has not aged well, for it assumes that readers are just as steeped in, and outraged by, the rhetorical manipulations of the Bush administration as apparently was Collins, and the book thus declines to gloss the topical references to Bush administration tactics. These allusions derive from a historically specific, if vanishing, moment, and the presumption that readers will be able to comprehend these references in perpetuity will jeopardize the book's longevity. For instance, the book begins with a lengthy analysis of the word *homeland*, but Collins never explains the particular significance of this word in a study about the centrality of religious narrative to American culture. Unstated in Collins's discussion is the Bush administration's creation of a Department of Homeland Security in 2002, after the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. The choice of the word *homeland* in the title of this department was indeed a curious one, and it received some attention at the time of this department's creation; however, Collins fails to make this context explicit, and it is unlikely that readers a decade from now will be able to comprehend the implicit reasoning that underlies this discussion.³ The omission of this context is unfortunately typical of *Homeland Mythology*, as is the uncertainty of the discussion's central thrust, for Collins never directly explains the wider cultural significance of his analysis, and he relies on the reader—in this case and in countless others—to connect the argumentative dots.

Furthermore, the book's many topical allusions to the Bush administration, which feature prominently but receive little explicit analysis, constitute a serious weakness in *Homeland Mythology's* construction, for Collins makes clear that Bush and his neoconservative boosters are the primary targets of the book's critique. The reader is repeatedly invited to see the resemblances between earlier nationalist rhetoric and the arguments propounded by Bush supporters, but the significance of this kinship remains unstated. The implication seems to be the suggestion that honest, transparent political administrations need not rely on religious rhetoric to defend their policies. Such an assumption evidences the book's tendency toward the opinionated over the factual, the suggestive over the explicit, the analogic over the argumentative, the progressive over the conservative, and the secular over the religious.

For a book that examines the American preoccupation with religious history, Collins's study is remarkably ahistorical. It makes sweeping, universal claims about "America" and "Christians" without any qualification specifying time period, region, race, or class. He presumes that American Christians are homogeneous, and nowhere in his study does he consider the many, many shadings that distinguish Christians from each other: denominations, regions, race, class, and gender, let alone the many distinctions within those categories. Denomination matters, and it matters crucially in providing the contexts that shape religious belief and practice. Unfortunately, Collins offers no such attention to these framing contexts, and he speaks broadly about Christians as if they were all conservative fundamentalists, which they most certainly are not. Nor does *Homeland Mythology* consider the long tradition in which biblical narrative provided justification for progressive politics, as with the Social Gospel movement of the turn of the last century or the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century.

Collins's imprecision in his handling of religion is, unfortunately, typical of the book as a whole, which is given to generalizations and misstatements. For instance, he boldly declares, "For Americans, the premodern roots of our culture are Puritan" (xiv). With virtually every word of it problematic, this sentence shows *Homeland Mythology* to be uninformed by the current methodological expectations of American studies scholarship, which include an insistence on corroborating evidence, as well as a skepticism about essentialism and the unitary nature of American culture. Collins's claims are often unsupported by data or citations. He claims, for example, that children memorized Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," but he fails to provide evidence, which is all the more vexing because it is highly unlikely that children in the

American South were expected to memorize this Civil War poem. In another passage, he claims that the Bush administration's justifications for the Iraq war were selected by polling results, yet he provides no citations to substantiate that claim; he likewise fails to provide data for his claims about American Christians' position on creationism and expectations of Christ's imminent return. He also announces that "most Christians believe that angels sang 'alleluia' on that first Christmas night" (110), an unsubstantiated claim undergirded by the incorrect assumption that "most Christians" are fundamentalists.

In the instances in which Collins does provide examples to support his claims, he typically omits any qualifying or contextualizing data. For instance, in discussing the racism he deems inherent in American religious myths, he mentions Thomas Virgil Peterson's *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South*, but he does not explicate who Peterson is, his affiliations or background, or the date of this text's publication, all significant details in the construction of an argument. Likewise, he mentions that "Cyrus Scofield was offended by the thought that angels are sexual beings" (78), but Collins declines to identify Scofield or explicate why his position on this point matters. Furthermore, Collins tends to offer examples that are problematic. Though the book announces itself as a study of the uses of religious narrative in American culture, Collins often supports his claims by offering as examples the work of non-American writers, among them Blake, Dante, and Wordsworth. While he acknowledges that Blake exerted no significant influence on nineteenth-century American writers (though that does not prevent Collins from discussing Blake nonetheless), he justifies his discussion of Wordsworth with the assertion that Wordsworth was the "Romantic poet that [*sic*] made the earliest and most lasting impression" on antebellum American writers, a claim unsupported either by evidence or by citations (193). In a discussion of the American "civil-religious vision of the world," Collins points to a passage from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* without mention of the fact that Conrad was an Anglo-Polish writer and that his evidentiary value in an argument about the United States is attenuated at best. These irrelevant examples suggest that Collins did not conduct sufficient research in American public discourse to provide examples that illustrate this preoccupation, and he used as evidence instead the canonical Great Books already in his ken.

These lapses in research are also evident in the book's failure to cite its key predecessors, among them the many scholarly works by such critics as Heimert and Miller, among others, that detail American engagement in religious typology. The bibliographical oversights are remarkable. The book includes an

entire chapter on captivity narratives, yet it cites none of the important recent studies that have focused on this form, among them Michelle Burnham's *Captivity and Sentiment* (1997) and Christopher Castiglia's *Bound and Determined* (1996); similarly, the discussion of the nineteenth-century revival of interest in medievalism fails to cite Jackson Lears's *No Place of Grace* (1981) or any other text on the subject.⁴ More troubling, however, is the book's failure to engage the vast corpus on nationalism and the centrality of narrative to the construction of nationhood, such as Benedict Anderson's long-canonical *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Priscilla Wald's *Constituting Americans* (1995).⁵ And though the book attempts to provide a prehistory of the rhetoric of the Bush administration, Collins fails to cite Karl Rove, the originator of so much Bush rhetoric, or Frank Rich, who was by far the most influential contemporary critic of Bush administration maneuvering and discourse.

The book's lapses in research are also evident in its many factual errors, some more significant than others. Collins states that the word *goyim* is Hebrew when it is in fact Yiddish, and at one point he discusses Jewish "preachers," a conflation of Judaism (which does not have preachers) with Protestantism that is troubling in its insensitivity (62). He likewise collapses the Millerites with the Seventh-Day Adventists and claims, erroneously, that Jehovah's Witnesses derived from Seventh-Day Adventism. He mischaracterizes William Miller as a farmer, an assertion that goes a long way toward making Miller and his followers look like fools, when Miller was in fact a Baptist preacher, a deputy sheriff, a justice of the peace, and a captain of the Vermont infantry. Many of his claims derive more from assumption than a thorough knowledge of religion in the United States. Collins presumes that the twentieth-century antipathy for evolutionary science among devout Christians is an evergreen one, but the relationship between the two is historically more complex. Many nineteenth-century religious leaders, Henry Ward Beecher among them, embraced the findings of Charles Darwin as evidence of a divine creator. Collins also presumes the timelessness of the phrase "What Would Jesus Do?," which enjoyed a revival in the first decade of the twenty-first century, but he overlooks that it was invented and popularized by Rev. Charles Sheldon with the publication of his blockbuster 1897 novel, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?*

Elizabeth A. Clark's recent study, *Founding the Fathers: Early Church History and Protestant Professors in Nineteenth-Century America*, illustrates the carefulness that the study of religion in the United States should entail. Like Collins, Clark is new to this field, but she is a distinguished historian of patristics, the theologians of the early church, and she brings her rigorous command of the

archive as well as her analytic sophistication to bear on the nineteenth-century American seminary. *Founding the Fathers* is a dense, detailed study of the careers of six nineteenth-century Protestant professors at Harvard, Princeton, Union Theological Seminary, and Yale whose professional trajectories reflect the development of American higher education in the nineteenth century. Though these four seminaries are today august, they were modest and financially uncertain at the time these professors began their careers, with tiny libraries, no curricula, and few faculty. *Founding the Fathers* considers these six professors as case studies in the development of the Protestant seminary and its institutional setting, showing how their respective careers register the maturation of this humanities discipline and of higher education more generally. A feat of archival research, *Founding the Fathers* situates these six figures within numerous contemporary contexts—educational, denominational, institutional—and in this respect it is a reassuring counterpoint to *Homeland Mythology* in its insistence that data must be analyzed within their contexts. *Founding the Fathers* is often deeply detailed, offering, for example, an inventory of the personal libraries of the Princeton professor Samuel Miller and Roswell Hitchcock of Union Theological Seminary. At the same time, these exhaustive discussions run the risk of overpowering the book's central argument about the intersection of nineteenth-century American patristics with the development of religious studies and humanities education in the United States.

Founding the Fathers is divided into three sections: a detailed intellectual biography of each professor and his home institution; a lengthy discussion of how each professor was affected by the “Higher Criticism,” the radical new religious historiography developing in German universities, as well as the religious philosophy of history that underlay each scholar's work; and a series of topical discussions that consider the position of each professor on some of the period's pressing questions, among them the debates about internal church governance, Roman Catholicism, and the place of marriage and family in Christian life. This last third is the book's most readable partly because it is less encumbered by archival detail. At the same time, this last section feels somewhat out of place in a volume about the place of patristics in the development of the liberal arts curriculum in the United States. The final chapter, on Augustine, seems better suited to the book's overall interest in patristics but is incongruous with the adjacent discussions of nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism and marriage.

One challenge of working outside one's traditional field is in knowing what to gloss and what to presume. Whereas Collins presumed his readers' familiarity with the tactics of the Bush administration, Clark often presumes

her readers' acquaintance with numerous religious movements, theologians, and controversies, dropping without clarification such esoteric names as Clement of Alexandria, Ebionitism, and Mopsuestia, a tendency that suggests her presumption of a readership composed of other specialists in ancient church history rather than nineteenth-century Americanists. This suggestion is corroborated by her occasional inclusion of untranslated passages of German, the lingua franca of religious studies. At the same time, she also presumes that her readers will be familiar with some of the major players and developments in nineteenth-century Protestantism, such as Charles Finney, the Presbyterian New School, and the Oxford Movement. The readership that will know all these religious allusions, without clarification, is a very small one indeed. While these references do not necessitate the deep historical contextualizations that occupy much of the book, they nonetheless merit some explanation for readers from other fields.

While *Founding the Fathers* is richly detailed and steeped in context, it can seem myopic in its focus on professors of northeastern seminaries of the Calvinist tradition. What goes unstated here is that these denominations were in very real decline in the nineteenth century because of the immense popularity of Methodism and other evangelical denominations such as the Baptists. The seminary and the university enabled these waning traditional denominations to build institutional fortifications against the incursion of more populist denominations and to consolidate their hold on the intellectual and cultural elite while losing ground among worshippers themselves. In this respect, *Founding the Fathers* would benefit from a discussion of the broader climate of Protestantism in the nineteenth century and the role of higher education in this struggle of traditional denominations to remain relevant and powerful. Likewise, *Founding the Fathers* makes an important argument about the contribution of seminaries and patristics to the development of humanities education in the United States, yet the book omits a discussion of the state of higher education in that period. The book's narrow focus and inattention to the broader cultural context may be due to the fact that Clark herself is not a nineteenth-century Americanist, so she may have been unaware of the larger cultural happenings that undergirded the careers of these seminary professors.

Despite its inattention to the wider cultural contexts, *Founding the Fathers* will prove useful to researchers interested in these foundational nineteenth-century theology professors. *Homeland Mythology* demonstrates the dangers that may befall scholars new to American religion studies as well as the necessity of historicizing religious belief: it is by no means a simple or uncomplicated affair, despite its widespread rendering as such in contemporary journalism.

Notes

1. Quoted in Tim Mak, "Santorum: 'JFK Speech Makes Me Want to Throw Up,'" *Politico*, February 26, 2002, www.politico.com/blogs/politico-live/2012/02/santorum-jfk-speech-makes-him-115569.html.
2. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975); Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind, from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966); Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956).
3. See, for instance, William Safire, "On Language: Homeland," *New York Times*, January 20, 2002, www.nytimes.com/2002/01/20/magazine/the-way-we-live-now-01-20-02-on-language-homeland.html.
4. Michelle Burnham, *Captivity and Sentiment: Cultural Exchange in American Literature, 1682–1861* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997); Christopher Castiglia, *Bound and Determined: Captivity, Culture-Crossing, and White Womanhood from Mary Rowlandson to Patty Hearst* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).
5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).