

Rational Orthodoxy

The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860, by E. Brooks Holifield, *Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978. x + 262 pp. \$14.75.*

APART FROM occasional references in the histories of congregations and denominations, brief notices in the biographies of Sprague and Taylor, and inferences drawn by intellectual historians like Eaton, W. J. Cash, and R. B. Davis, the contribution of southern preachers and professors to American theology lies largely unexamined in numberless published sermons, treatises, and seminary announcements, and in a voluminous and neglected theological periodical literature. Allen Tate, whose "Remarks on Southern Religion" (his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930) first called attention to the nature of antebellum religious experience, was a literary critic who spoke from recollection, ignoring the regional theological

literature. And often contemporary scholars, while recognizing the existence of a sociologically interesting religion in the nineteenth-century South, have seemed to write as though this powerful religion proceeded without theological reflection. Perhaps it is difficult to believe that a region incapable of producing a great literature could foster a significant theology. But this conclusion underestimates the southern obsession with the social, with the life of the community and those things necessary to it, a consuming interest which dictated that while poetry would be learned from Virgil and music left to amateurs, politics, horticulture, and theology would be lively and perennial concerns. And perhaps historians have sometimes sacrificed the cosmopolitan character of antebellum southern towns to anachronism. After 1865 the South, impoverished by a failed rebellion and threatened with social dissolution, was indeed rendered provincial by the unprecedented industrial development of the midwest and the intellectual vitality of the northern universities. In 1850 the culture of Nashville, Natchez, and Mobile, however, was not obviously inferior to that of Syracuse or Newark. Among the chief merits of *The Gentlemen Theologians* is the success with which Brooks Holifield lays to rest the caricature of southern religion as an anti-intellectual, emotional antithesis to the cool rationalism of New England. He demonstrates, as his subtitle suggests, that the religious thought of the South had a significant place in the national development of theological thought, and that town preachers, usually educated with their northern brethren and in every respect their intellectual peers, brought to southern capitals and county seats a reasonable religion which was accepted wholeheartedly, at least until rationalism began to threaten orthodoxy.

Mr. Holifield has correctly assessed a setting, an institution, a profession, and a theology, each a delicately interrelated element in an important phase of southern intellectual and social development. The set-

ting was the southern town, which after 1800 began to provide a context for a rich urban life, not only in the seaboard states, where Charleston, New Orleans, Savannah, and Annapolis offered venerable examples of urban success, but in the interior South, where by 1835 towns like Memphis, Huntsville, Columbia, Macon, and Vicksburg flourished. Praised for their society, for the polish of their inhabitants, and for their generous sponsorship of learning and culture—a compliment not always deserved—the newly rich southern towns of the 1840's were centers of social and intellectual life for the surrounding countryside. After the county court, housed fittingly in its Greek Revival courthouse, the most important institutions were the churches. Their congregations occupied elegant buildings like Robert Mills' Monumental Church in Richmond; Strickland's First Presbyterian Church in Nashville; and the Church of the Nativity in Huntsville, designed by Frank Wills of New York. These imposing edifices dominated the skyline of the typical southern city as its wealthy congregations dominated town life. Within these Gothic, Grecian, and Egyptian temples the gentlemen theologians practiced their profession. The preachers themselves represented a grand experiment, the attempt of the great Protestant denominations to propagate their churches in the interior South without the support provided by the state in eighteenth-century England, Scotland, Massachusetts, and Virginia. The ministers and rectors of colonial America had been secure dispensers of religion, licensed and sponsored by states which could not conceive any radical disjunction between the civic and religious life of the community. The few Catholic priests in the interior South, if not members of religious orders, were committed to a life of celibate penury. The town preacher, however, saw himself as a professional possessed of a body of knowledge indispensable to the community and entitled to emoluments not unlike those his fellow-professionals, the lawyer and the doctor,

enjoyed. In maintaining the status his vocation implied, the town preacher relied on his popularity, his learning, his wit, his ability to exemplify his society's ideals of learning and piety and to render himself essential by interpreting for the culture its religious experience.

The interpretation which he offered was, in Holifield's apt phrase, rational orthodoxy. The author's analysis is accurate, his scholarship sure, as he argues convincingly that the overriding concern of the gentlemen theologians was the vindication of their faith from any imputation of unreasonableness. In this attempt they drew upon an impressive array of sources. Rational orthodoxy owed much to the Scottish philosophy of Reid and Stewart, to William Paley's *Evidences*, to Butler's *Analogy*, to a realist reading of Kant, and to the rationalistic strain which undergirded Calvinism. These, in turn, were Enlightenment exegeses of the medieval principles that faith, though mysterious, was ever reasonable, and that intellect, though ultimately powerless before the mystery, was capable of proving at least God's existence, unity, and goodness. The nineteenth-century search for evidences in geology and botany was a modern reading of nature's book, a theological enterprise as ancient as Christianity. This pervasive commitment to rationality was, as Holifield shows, shared by Protestants and Catholics, most of whom, far from rejecting the claims of reason, wrote from a background of half-remembered scholasticism and consciously espoused rationalism.

In establishing the character and complexity of rational orthodoxy, the author uses not only published biographies and treatises but also neglected theological manuscripts from the major regional collections and many important unpublished dissertations. Technically, *The Gentlemen Theologians* is a splendid contribution to the long overdue scholarly consideration of this extensive literature. The author's discussions of James Henley Thornwell, R. B. C. Howell, Thomas Ralston, John

England, Henry Bascom, Thomas Smyth, and Robert Dabney, to mention only a few, are significant contributions to the history of theology in the South. The notes to the text contain a valuable bibliography of antebellum theology.

Perhaps the chief weakness of the author's argument is the ease with which his apologia for rationalism outruns his appreciation for southern orthodoxy. For example, Holifield's argument would suggest that Taylorism (named for Nathaniel W. Taylor of Yale), the Christian rationalism of the 1820's, shared much ground with the deism of Paine, both being concerned chiefly to vindicate God's reasonableness. Taylor urged a modified Arminianism against the seeming irrationality of predestination. Paine argued the classic Enlightenment reliance on reason. And he is also right in seeing that for the gentlemen theologians the sacraments were not mysteries but seals of the covenant signs of the promise or reminders of God's mercy, an argument Holifield develops from his earlier work. He explains less convincingly, however, the inability of theological liberalism to establish itself in southern towns, the ultimate unwillingness of the gentlemen theologians to abandon the rhetoric of orthodoxy, even when their intellectual pursuits commended most urgently a rational faith. By 1850 liberalism, which in 1845 had held some promise in the South, was waning, its speculative interests replaced by an increasingly perfervid insistence that revelation existed, be it reasonable or not. Perhaps this was part of a more fundamental commitment of antebellum society to tradition. The town preachers sensed that Scripture and Aristotle both derived authority from that unimpugnable source. Perhaps liberalism could not flourish in a society which had inherited an unshakable belief in an ordered cosmos, in which reason was defended as traditional and tradition as reasonable. Orthodoxy struck its deepest roots in neither reason nor authority. There was, as a distinguished succession of critics including Tate,

Richard Weaver, and Flannery O'Connor have observed, always something of a full-blown supernaturalism in the Old South. At least there was a memory of the mysteries of grace and evil, persisting throughout the triumphalist fifties to become, after the war, the dominant strain in the religion of defeated people.

Explaining southern religion has always been an intellectual puzzle, for the historian deals with considerable fragments, tantalizingly reminiscent of an integral original. The belief in reason, borrowed from the tradition stretching from Justin Martyr to Paley was, as Holifield shows, pervasive. The conviction that authority, conjoined to experience as tradition, was the only certain basis for belief was not seriously contested. Perhaps it found its supreme exemplar in the regional certainty that the sacred text was God's unmediated word. Perhaps Tate was wrong—so Holifield's argument might indicate—when he wrote in his famous essay that southerners, "not having a rational system for the defense of their religious attitude..., elaborated no rational system whatever, no fullgrown philosophy...." But on the larger question Tate was right: "Southerners had a religious life, but it was not enough organized with a right mythology. In fact their rational life was not powerfully united to the religious ex-

perience...." Holifield has explained the quest of the town clergy for reasonableness convincingly. But he has failed, perhaps unavoidably, to locate rational orthodoxy in the complex background which prominently included camp meetings and conversion. Another book could be written by pursuing an historiographical line through the theology of Jonathan Edwards, the Separate Baptists, Methodism, New Light Presbyterianism, and the Tractarian piety of the fifties, all of which directed the believer toward experience, conversion, or mystical union, bypassing or transcending the concerns of the rationally orthodox. Rational orthodoxy was, as Holifield rightly observes, a town religion, touching by 1850 perhaps eight percent of the southern population. Orthodoxy was less rational in the country, or was rational enough to realize that tame town preachers could not explain the mystery. When southern theology found its voice after the war, it spoke the language of *God Without Thunder*, which John Crowe Ransom prefaced with the reminder, "I am the son of a theologian, and the grandson of another," and concluded with the warning that modern man should "insist on a virile and concrete God, and accept no principle as a substitute."

Reviewed by JAMES A. PATRICK