

BOOK REVIEW

of

E. Brooks Holifield,

Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War,
Yale University Press, 2003.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

When I read *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, Oxford University Press, 2002, by Mark Noll (see the review in the July/August 2007 issue, Volume 19, No. 7/8, of *Evangel News*) I thought it was the definitive statement on theology in America for about the same historical period that Holifield's book covers. After all, Noll's book was the winner of the Historical Society's 2004 Eugene Genovese Best Book in American History Prize. And Sean Michael Lucas, Assistant Professor of Church History at Covenant Theological Seminary and Vice President for Academics and Dean of Faculty, refers to Noll's book as his *magnum opus* (a person's greatest work). *The New Republic* writes that this book by Noll "is destined to shape discussions of the history of American religion and politics for a long time." *The Weekly Standard* refers to the book as "Magisterial". In 2005, *Time* magazine named Noll one of the country's "25 Most Influential Evangelicals." I enjoyed Noll's book very much, and since he is an evangelical writer and the book received so many accolades I thought that one book would suffice for that time period for quite some time to come. And then published shortly thereafter was this book by Holifield. Since he is a professor of American Church History at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, and I had no personal knowledge of either Holifield or the school where he teaches, I was skeptical of this work. However, Noll himself endorses the book on the back cover: "'Magisterial' is the only word fit to describe E. Brooks Holifield's magnificent survey of Christian thinkers, their thought, and the contexts in which they did their work." And Sean Michael Lucas (of Covenant Theological Seminary, mentioned above) writes: Holifield "has . . . succeeded brilliantly in this comprehensive treatment of American theology from colonial founding to civil war. . . . The prose is crisp and clear, the summaries of major theologians and intellectual positions thorough yet concise, the coverage broad and comprehensive. . . . *Theology in America*, quite simply, is a superlative work." So, I read the book. One of the great delights of being a reader is the occasional surprise! And this book was a very pleasant surprise. As much as I enjoyed Noll's book, and as much as I thought I would probably never need to read another book covering the same period, I found Holifield to be indeed superlative. In retrospect, I would say that Noll's book is more of an historical overview of the period, whereas Holifield concentrates on the theology of the period. There is considerably more theology in Holifield than there is in Noll. For those interested in that critical period of American history, I would strongly endorse both books. Regardless of whatever Holifield's personal convictions may be, he was not arguing the case for a particular position, but rather it appears that he was successful in his dispassionate scholarly efforts to let the historical persons speak for themselves and accurately present their positions.

The book is divided into three parts. After a beginning chapter 1, Introduction: Theology in America, Part 1, Calvinist Origins, consists of chapters 2 through 6: The New England Calvinists; Rationalism Resisted; Nature, the Supernatural, and Virtue; Jonathan Edwards; and Fragmentation in New England. Part 2, The Baconian Style, consists of chapter 7 through 18: The Deists; Evidential Christianity; Unitarian Virtue; Universal Salvation; Episcopal Theology and Tradition; Methodist Perfection; The Baptists and Calvinist Diversity; Restoration; Roots of Black Theology; The Immediacy of Revelation; Calvinism Revised; and "True Calvinism" Defended. Part 3, Alternatives to Baconian Reason, consists of chapter 19 through 26: Lutherans: Reason, Revival, and Confession; Catholics: Reason and the Church; The Transcendentalists: Intuition; Horace Bushnell: Christian Comprehensiveness; The Mercersburg Theology: Communal Reason; Orestes Brownson and Isaac Hecker: Transcendental Catholicism; The Dilemma of Slavery; and Afterword.

In the first two paragraphs in Holifield's book, he writes as follows: "For more than a century in early colonial America, theologians ruled the realm of ideas. America's first learned class consisted largely of Protestant clergy, and the relatively small number of pastors who published books of theology, or 'divinity,' attained the status of the most learned of the learned. Until almost the dawning of the American Revolution, theologians exercised a singular authority in American print culture. . . . For almost three centuries, theologians enjoyed a position of substantial authority in the intellectual life of America." In the Afterword, Holifield writes: "Writing in 1916, Arthur Cushman McGiffert, the president of Union Seminary in New York, identified the trends that had most deeply influenced theology in the previous fifty years. He emphasized evolutionary theory, especially in its Darwinian forms; the growing influence of historical consciousness, especially in biblical criticism; an expanding interest in the social characteristics of human life and knowledge, expressed both in social reform and in philosophies that recognized the social context of thinking; and the changing fashions of philosophical teaching in the American universities, especially the rise of philosophical idealism and pragmatism." So, assuming this is correct, in 1916 it was the outside influences of Darwinism, biblical criticism, and philosophy that had most deeply influenced theology. Whereas during the colonial period it was theology that was doing most of the influencing. What happened in between? Answering that question is at least one of the main purposes of this book. There were many influences at work, but some of them may be identified as the rise of enlightenment secularism, political turmoil, and the breakdown of puritan Calvinism due to the rise of competing religious commitments.

One of the contributions of this book is that it provides an overview of virtually all of the significant religious communities within the United States during the period covered. It is, no doubt, limited by Holifield's expertise and biases, but he at least makes the attempt to present all of them and how they are interrelated. He covers Calvinists, Deists, Unitarians, Universalists, Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, Quakers, Shakers, Mormons, Lutherans, Catholics, Transcendentalists, and early liberalism. Remember, he is not discussing the present, but rather Puritan New England through the Civil War. One comes away with a much greater appreciation of the religious diversity that existed in early America. Even at the time of the Revolution there was not nearly the religious unity that some seem to think. We are a nation of immigrants, and that was true early on. True, very early Puritan New England was dominated by Calvinism, but even there theological diversity was considerable prior to the Revolution. Recall Jonathan Edwards' writings against the Arminians decades before the Revolution. Nevertheless, Holifield writes in the Introduction that "A substantial part of the history of theology in early America was an extended debate, stretching over more than two centuries, about the meaning and the truth of Calvinism. . . . In a history of American theology, the Calvinists loom large."

In chapter 16, titled The Immediacy of Revelation, Holifield groups together religious communities that we would perhaps not usually associate. His approach will likely also call to mind more modern communities as well. What ties them together in Holifield's mind is their low view of Scripture. Rather than approaching the written Word as indeed God's Word and relying on the sometimes difficult and even painful study required to read it and interpret it correctly, they relied on an immediate revelation. While there is merit in depending on the Holy Spirit to enable us to read God's Word appropriately, it is also a pathway that can quickly lead to error. The groups Holifield discusses are the Quakers, Shakers, and Mormons. Once one is open to new, direct revelations, how does one show that such claims are in error? "When Mormons spoke in tongues, healed the sick, washed each other's feet, prophesied, and received the bread and wine of communion, they considered themselves to be reenacting practices of the early church." According to Holifield, Joseph Smith presented himself as restoring Christianity to its first-century purity.

Holifield presents transcendentalists in a similar vein. Although they were not likely to claim visitations by angels revealing new scripture, transcendentalists were (or are) mystics relying on intuition. Cold philosophy or even properly reading and interpreting Scripture is not spiritual enough. Although Holifield does not think that transcendentalists are true followers of Immanuel Kant, many do look to him as a foundation for their own ideas. Probably the most well-known transcendentalist of this period was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson was a Unitarian minister in his early career, so he never was in the evangelical camp, yet "His convictions slowly drove him outside the bounds of historic Christianity, and he eventually interpreted theology as no more than 'the rhetoric of morals.' His discovery of the 'God within' altered his early moralism, but he never fully abandoned his belief that the aim of religion, like that of nature, required conformity to a morally demanding Law." Once again we see the consequences of poor theology leading to an ever increasing departure from Biblical teachings.

If Holifield's presentation of the immediacy of revelation and of the transcendentalists seems refreshing and puts groups together that we may not have considered, he doesn't disappoint with those who emphasize the experiential in religion either. "Bushnell's turn to religious experience as a source for theology has given him a place among the founders of American theological liberalism, and his disciples occupied prominent places within the circles of 'progressive orthodoxy' that marked the early stages of liberal theology." If it is your opinion that liberal churches are places devoid of true worship, it may seem surprising that the originators were those who turned from cold orthodoxy and stressed the personal experience of faith; Holifield may be an eye-opener. But given such a start it is not surprising that the slide away from a high view of Scripture was a rapid one.

This work appears to me to be Christian scholarship of the highest level. For what it's worth, I agree with Benjamin Schwartz of the *Atlantic Monthly* who writes that this book "will remain for at least a generation the definitive chronicle of an essential aspect of American religious and intellectual history."