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Gorman, Childers, and Hamiltons' "Slavery's long shadow: Race and reconciliation in American Christianity" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Gorman, J. L., Childers, J. W., and Hamilton M. W., (Eds.). (2019). *Slavery's long shadow: Race and reconciliation in American Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 271 pp. \$32.00. ISBN 9780802876232

It is often said that Sunday mornings remain the most segregated hour in America when Christians gather for worship. *Slavery's Long Shadow* examines the relationship between race and Christianity in American churches from the 1790s to the twenty-first century. This collection of essays by historians, professors, and scholars seeks to provide historical perspective on the central role of race and religion upon American history, politics, and culture.

In the book's opening essay by editors James L. Gorman, Jeff W. Childers, and Mark W. Hamilton, the 2016 presidential election represents a manifestation of slavery's long shadow of influence on the relationship between race, politics, and religion. The polar opposite voting record of white, Evangelical Christians and black Evangelicals in the most recent election is summarized and cited. This led the scholars to explore the question of what explains this sharp dichotomy. The central theme or question explored by the book's essays is: "How have race relations and Christian unity interacted and shaped both the church and the larger American culture?" (p. 3) The focus is on black-white relations and Christian community in the United States. This work seeks to acknowledge and honor the legacy and life's work of religious historian Douglas A. Foster "to the causes of religious and racial unity". (p. v)

The essays are grouped in three sections: five chapters address and overview historical periods, four chapters present case studies, and three look to the future with hope for racial reconciliation. The case studies and essays on ways forward narrow the discussion to the Stone-Campbell Movement, which is the tradition of author and Restoration Movement scholar Douglas Foster.

The introductory historical overview essays openly acknowledge and address the tragedy and racist ideology evidenced by American black-white race relations from slavery in the early American republic through the American Civil War. The tension and goal of Christian unity across racial divisions is evidenced from the inherent and inalienable rights of the Declaration of Independence and through the evangelical revivalism of the Second Great Awakening (1790s-1830s). This in turn bore missionary evangelism and antebellum abolitionism. The tragedies of American Christian racism and segregation through Reconstruction, Jim Crow lynching,

and contemporary white nationalism and structural racism are contrasted with the virtues and unifying “Christianity of Christ”. The role of the Christian Church in promoting Civil Rights is set against the rise of the Religious Right. The chapters focusing on the tragic and encouraging case studies of the Churches of Christ, Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and Christian Church/Disciples of Christ are perhaps of greater interest to students of American religion and theology. The last three chapters present personal experience and examples of trying to apply the gospel in Stone–Campbell Movement churches. The role of women both black and white in the Stone–Campbell traditions is the subject of one of these chapters. The final chapters highlight the career of Douglas Foster to encourage reconciliation across religious and racial divisions.

The book serves as a supplement to survey college courses in American history and religion for an undergraduate audience. The essays provide historical context to understand the tension in American race relations and a call to American Christian churches and American Christians to overcome the tribalism of racial divide and continue to strive in the best traditions of unity and reconciliation. This heavily footnoted book would point interested scholars to the substantial literature on race and religion in American history. This work succeeds in its goal of presenting African American and religious themes as essential to the understanding of American history and our current religious, cultural, and political climate. There is an undergirding message of positivity and hopefulness about the prospect of individual Christians and the Christian church being a present and future hope for unification and reconciliation. This book shows the impact an individual Christian and the role Christian churches can have for good and ill. It stands as both a warning against its failures and a call to be in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “the beloved community” united by faith.

Reviewer

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