

Of Saints and Sinners

Religion and the Civil War and Reconstruction Novel

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Abstract

Exploring religious themes, idioms, and language in Albion Tourgée's and Thomas Dixon Jr.'s most noteworthy novels on the Civil War and Reconstruction, this study suggests that religion provided a critically important medium to discuss sectional and race relations. Attention to religion exposes both differences *and* similarities in these texts. While Dixon described northern faith as corrupt, Tourgée viewed southern Christianity as hypocritical; although Dixon mocked northern missionaries as blunderers, Tourgée praised them as angels sent from heaven. But the authors shared several positions as well. They depicted the Ku Klux Klan as a quasi-religious organization, acknowledged the position of southern churches as locations of cultural hegemony, and believed that religion must play a role in regional reconciliation. Ultimately, this study challenges historians and literary critics to move beyond mere examinations of the racial and gender issues in Tourgée's and Dixon's novels by demonstrating how sectional, racial, and gender ideologies were often explained and mediated by religious beliefs and language.

Introduction and Historiography

[1] When film director D. W. Griffith transformed Thomas Dixon's Reconstruction novel *The Clansman* into the blockbuster 1915 motion picture *Birth of a Nation*, he included *most* of Dixon's cast of villains. A coterie of poor southern white "scalawags," sexually-charged African Americans, diabolical radical Republicans, and greedy northern "carpetbaggers" conspired together to demoralize the white South. Griffith, however, omitted one of the groups Dixon adamantly blamed for the evils of Reconstruction – northern Protestant ministers. In fact, Dixon held these pastors and their Easter sermons after Abraham Lincoln's Good Friday assassination responsible for embittering northern sentiment against the fallen South. As he described, "Fifty thousand Christian ministers stunned and crazed by insane passion stood before the altars of God, [and] hurled into the broken hearts before them the wildest cries of vengeance - cries incoherent, chaotic, unreasoning, blind in their awful fury" (1905: 83).

[2] In contrast to Dixon's appraisal, northern novelist and radical Republican Albion Tourgée offered quite a different interpretation of the Christian response to the war's end and Lincoln's assassination. "Perhaps there has been no grander thing in our history," he penned, than when "[t]he civilization of the North in the very hour of victory threw aside the cartridge-box, and appealed at once to the contribution-box to heal the ravages of war." Specifically, he praised northern Protestants for sending capital and missionaries to the South to help African American freedpeople. To Tourgée, "it was the noblest spectacle that Christian civilization has ever witnessed" (1880: 133).

[3] Modern scholars would find little shocking about interpretive differences between Tourgée and Dixon, for most see them as the chief literary spokesmen for diametrically opposing positions regarding southern race relations during the Gilded Age. Dixon spoke on behalf of southern white supremacists, and southern whites read his novels voluminously. His first novel,

The Leopard's Spots, sold so many copies that his contemporaries labeled it a "mob novel," a categorization reserved for works that sold hundreds of thousands of copies. (Bloomfield: 399) Historian Joel Williamson has estimated that Dixon's novels, and plays and movies based on them, were so popular that he "probably did more to shape the lives of modern Americans than have some Presidents" (141). Tourgée, alternatively, was the voice of radical Republicanism after the fall of Reconstruction. His novels begged the North not to forget or neglect southern blacks and racial justice. And in the 1880s and 1890s, Tourgée was one of the most radical white proponents of African American rights. In 1880, President James Garfield looked to him in order to assess the state of race relations in the South, and in the 1890s, Tourgée was part of a flurry of civil rights activities. He was one of the attorneys for Homer Plessy in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), and he was the principal force in the formation of the National Citizens Rights Association, a short-lived forerunner of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. During the Gilded Age, Tourgée was one of the few northern whites who maintained a commitment to African Americans (Olsen).

[4] Most scholars, however, would be surprised by the intensity with which these authors described religion and religious characters. An examination of the ways Tourgée and Dixon depicted religious ideologies, characters, and institutions suggests that faith affected regional relationships and conceptions much more than current historical scholarship indicates.¹ For the most part, post-1960 studies of the massive outpouring of Civil War and Reconstruction novels during the late nineteenth-century focus on gender and racial issues. Whether analyzing the countless cross-sectional romantic relationships or the images of menacing African American freedmen terrorizing white women, these scholars have rightly pointed out how gender and racial ideologies deeply influenced northern and southern views of one another and regional reconciliation (Silber, Gilmore, and Bloomfield). Indeed, both Tourgée and Dixon employed gender metaphors and racial imagery in their novels. Their strong feelings about ministers and missionaries, however, indicate that along with race and gender, religion also played a pivotal role in regional conceptions, animosities, and resolutions. This essay does not purport to overturn the racial and gendered analyses; rather, it seeks to complicate and enrich them. Through an exploration of Tourgée's and Dixon's most noteworthy novels, *A Fool's Errand*, *Bricks Without Straw*, *The Leopard's Spots*, and *The Clansman*, this study shows that religious beliefs and language were critically important to Gilded Age conceptions of sectional and race relations. Ultimately, it attempts to reveal the intersections of race, gender, and religion in late nineteenth-century novels about the Civil War and Reconstruction.

[5] By using religion as a lens to view these novels, I hope to shed new light on Dixon's and Tourgée's works and also to offer a new method of analysis for Gilded Age novels on the Civil War and Reconstruction. In fact, attention to religion exposes both differences *and* similarities in these texts. While Dixon described northern faith as corrupt, Tourgée viewed southern Christianity as hypocritical; although Dixon mocked Yankee missionaries to the South as idiotic blunderers, Tourgée praised them as angels sent from above. These differences, however, should not obfuscate the points they shared in common. Both depicted the Ku Klux Klan as a quasi-religious organization; both acknowledged the crucial position of southern churches as locations of cultural hegemony; and, finally, both believed that religion and the Protestant God must play a

¹ Some of Tourgée's contemporaries recognized the religious overtones in his works. *The Century*, for instance, considered *A Fool's Errand* "a vigorous burst of righteous wrath" ("The Native Element in American Fiction," *The Century: A Popular Quarterly* [July 1883]: 367).

role in regional reconciliation. In short, these novelists used religion as a way to articulate regional differences and regional reconciliation.

[6] A brief look at Tourgée's and Dixon's personal histories should make their emphases on religion less astounding. Born in the 1840s, Tourgée came from a long line of French Huguenots, and his parents inculcated him with Protestant values from his boyhood. In his semi-autobiographical *A Fool's Errand*, Tourgée referred to himself as "an active member of the church . . . and superintendent of its Sabbath school" (1879: 13). Like his carpetbagger counterpart, Dixon also came from a religious background; his father, Thomas Dixon, Sr., was a renowned Baptist minister, and Dixon, Jr. spent much of his childhood at church services, Sunday School, and other religious functions. After graduating from Wake Forest and passing the bar exam with the intent of practicing law, Dixon decided to enter the ministry instead. During the 1880s, he was one of the Gilded Age's most promising young ministers, preaching to large congregations in Boston and New York. As this examination will show, these religious backgrounds are visible in their writings (Cook and Bloomfield).

North versus South

[7] In their novels about the Civil War and Reconstruction, Tourgée and Dixon often described the North and the South as having conflicting religious beliefs and practices that kept them culturally separated. Tourgée portrayed southern religion as duplicitous and fraudulent. Marveling and lamenting at how southern white Christians despised and subjugated African Americans, he railed against their tacit acceptance of lynching. "He could not understand how men of the highest Christian character," Tourgée wrote of the carpetbagger protagonist in *A Fool's Errand*, "could be the perpetrators, encouragers, or excusers" of an African American lynching: "Yet the pulpit kept silent," he grieved (1879: 316). Tourgée also bemoaned the southern belief in the divine nature of slavery. He wrote his most bitter invective against southern religion in *Bricks Without Straw*: "Ah God! how sad that history should be compelled to make up so dark a record, abuse, contumely, violence! Christian tongues befouled with calumny! Christian lips blistered with falsehood! Christian hearts overflowing with hate!" (1880: 134). Tourgée, in short, viewed white supremacy as an egregious sin that revealed the duplicity of southern white Christianity.

[8] Unlike Tourgée's appraisal, Dixon believed southern white religion and racial segregation to be sacred and in-step with biblical teachings. Portraying Abraham Lincoln as a southerner (something Dixon often enjoyed doing), Dixon had Lincoln espouse religious arguments in favor of racial segregation.² After a radical Republican defended African American equality by claiming "God hath made of one blood all races," Lincoln promptly responded "Yes - but finish the sentence - 'and fixed the bounds of their habitation.' God never meant that the negro should leave his habitat or the white man invade his home" (1905: 47). To Dixon, racial segregation was not immoral; it was ordained in heaven. Like proslavery advocates during the antebellum period, Dixon interpreted and used passages in the Old Testament to buttress his beliefs in racial inequality and difference (Tise). Moreover, he equated holiness with whiteness and manliness when depicting the white South as a religious community. Southerners, he contended, were "a sturdy, honest, covenant-keeping, God-fearing, fighting people" (1905: 188). Connecting

² Dixon actually wrote one entire novel arguing that Lincoln was a southerner (1913). For the southern trend to depict Lincoln as a southerner, see Davis: 150.

religion, virtue, and manhood, Dixon maintained that southerners stood as God's chosen people (Davenport).

[9] As they varied in their interpretations of southern issues of race, Dixon and Tourgée also offered contradicting depictions of northern religion and Yankee missionary activities in the South. To Dixon, northern religion was pharisaical and only interested in punishing the South. In *The Clansman*, he used the radical Republican leader Thaddeus Stevens as the epitome of corrupted Yankee religion.³ Stevens was more than a political leader to Dixon; he was an evil prophet. On one occasion, Dixon had Stevens comment to his Republican colleagues: "I preach equality as a poet and seer who sees a vision beyond the rim of the horizon of to-day." Stevens continues, arguing, "It is but the justice and wisdom of Heaven that the negro shall rule the land of his bondage" (1905: 182, 183). But to Dixon, Stevens was no angel of light. Rather, he was a tool of darkness, and Dixon pointed toward Stevens' infidelism by painting him as a friend to the evils of Roman Catholicism. "Among his many charities," Dixon wrote of Stevens, "he had always given liberally to an orphanage conducted by a Roman Catholic sisterhood." To many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century evangelical Protestants, support for Catholicism was tantamount to blasphemy and any allegiance to the Pope was equated with treason to the United States. Thus, rather than signifying piety, such contributions exposed Stevens' villainy (for three discussions of anti-Catholicism in nineteenth-century America, see Franchot; Paz; Anbinder). By the end of *The Clansman*, however, Stevens realizes his mistaken war against the white South and seeks to atone. He finds a southern Presbyterian minister and begs for forgiveness. "I wish to confess to you," Stevens cries, "and set myself right before God." Not truly interested in black rights all along, Stevens admits his evil demagoguery: "Three forces moved me - party success, a vicious woman, and the quenchless desire for personal vengeance" (1905: 371). Only through religious confession, Dixon narrated, does Stevens both admit his wrong and reconcile himself with his southern brethren. For the remaining portion of the book, Stevens not only ceases his attacks against white southerners, but he also comes to embrace them.

[10] Tourgée presented a much different appraisal of northern religion and religious figures. To him, northern Christians were genuinely interested in African American rights and were not mere demagogues. "The North . . . was . . . honest in its conviction with regard to the wickedness of slavery," he wrote (1880: 139, 140). Furthermore, northern Christians carried the banner of African American racial uplift into the South. Northern missionaries were in Tourgée's opinion the truest disciples of Jesus Christ. As he described one in *Bricks Without Straw*, he wrote, "the gentle child felt called of God to do missionary work for a weak and struggling people. She thought she felt the divine commandment which rested on the Nazarene" (1880: 134, 135). After the war, Tourgée suggested, northerners who set out to alter the South were prompted by sincere faith. "The first step," he argued, was the commitment to legal marriages for freed people. "It was prompted by the voice of conscience," he wrote, "long hushed and hidden in the master's breast. It was the protest of Christianity and morality against that which it had witnessed with complacency for many a generation. All at once it was perceived to be a great enormity that four millions of Christian people, in a Christian land, should dwell together without marriage rite or family tie" (1880: 35).

³ In *The Clansman*, Dixon renames Thaddeus Stevens, "Austin Stoneman," but the introduction makes it quite clear that Stoneman is Stevens. In reality, Stevens did not do or say most of the things that Dixon claims.

[11] Northern allegiance to African Americans, however, did not stop at the marriage altar. Yankee Protestant missionaries also brought education, and Tourgée viewed these missionaries as “on a noble errand . . . doing God’s work in teaching” the southern freedpeople. “As the North gave, willingly and freely, men and millions to save the nation from disruption,” he penned, “so, when peace came, it gave other brave men and braver women, and other unstinted millions to strengthen the hands which generations of slavery had left feeble and inept.” To Tourgée, these Yankee schoolmarms embodied virtuous religion: “Thousands of white-souled angels of peace, the tenderly reared and highly-cultured daughters of many a Northern home, came into the smitten land to do good to its poorest and weakest.” And these missionaries left a lasting legacy. “Even to this day,” Tourgée maintained, “two score of schools and colleges remain, the glorious mementoes of this enlightened bounty and Christian magnanimity” (1880: 132, 133). Tourgée’s appreciation for the Yankee schoolmarms squared with his intense belief in the importance of education for African Americans. As his biographer Otto Olsen maintains, Tourgée considered education the key ingredient to African American rights. The missionaries, then, stood as the radical vanguard for racial justice, carrying the awesome power of the cross and the spelling book into the South (Olsen).

[12] Dixon held quite a different view of Yankee schoolmarms and their efforts. Though not as sinister as the radical Stevens, they nonetheless stood as misguided fools and less than female. To discredit such women, Dixon described their physical appearance as unattractive and unfeminine. Missionary “Susan Walker of Boston,” he wrote, “fell just a little short of being handsome and [her] nose was responsible for the failure. It gave to her face when agitated, in spite of evident culture and refinement, the expression of a feminine bulldog” (1902: 45).⁴ Although Yankee schoolmarms may appear respectable, when disturbed, their bodies exposed their lack of womanliness. This “feminine bulldog” description stood in stark contrast to the nineteenth-century association between piety and women (Bordin). To cast doubt on the religious missions of the schoolmarms, in short, Dixon questioned their femininity. He also saw their mission as foolhardy. To Dixon, black education constituted one of the most repugnant aspects of radical Republicanism. He believed that schooling would ultimately destroy African Americans. “Education,” he wrote, “increases the power of the human brain to think and the heart to suffer. Sooner or later these educated Negroes feel the clutch of the iron hand of the white man’s unwritten laws on their throats. They have their choice between a suicide’s grave or a prison cell. . . . The South is kinder to the Negro when he is kept in his place” (1902: 265). Educated African Americans, he argued, would have no other choice but to end their lives when they realized their political and social position as second-class citizens.

Agreements of the Antagonists

[13] While Dixon and Tourgée disagreed on their interpretations of Yankee missionaries and regional religious beliefs and practices, they did in fact make some parallel arguments. While most scholars would view them as having nothing in common, an analysis of the religious motifs and arguments they used to describe white terrorism, southern churches, and southern political culture reveals several similarities. In fact, both writers described white terrorist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan as quasi-religious bodies that appealed to southern white Christians. After the death of a young white woman at the hands of an African American man, Dixon narrated that

⁴ Dixon regularly used the nose as a distinctive feature that revealed the differences between “true” southern whites and northern carpetbaggers or southern scalawags (for another instance, see Dixon 1912: 71).

“The trumpet of the God of our fathers call[ed] the sleeping manhood of the Anglo-Saxon race to life again” (1902: 128). The answer to God’s call came clothed in the regalia of the Ku Klux Klan. Mixing religion and gender as he had in his description of the southern community and the Yankee missionaries, Dixon depicted the Klan as battling, “for their God, their native land, and the womanhood of the South!” (1905: 338). On another occasion, he compared Klan members to “the Knights of the Middle Ages [who] rode on their Holy Crusades” (1905: 316). Linking masculinity and religious mission, Dixon viewed Klan members as Christian warriors. Furthermore, he often described local ministers sanctioning the Klan’s white supremacist activities and Klan assemblies beginning with chaplain’s prayers.⁵ Illustrations of Klan members in the 1905 edition of *The Clansman* clearly depicted them as religious. As seen in the images, Klan members not only bore crucifixes on their chests, but they also wielded blazing crosses in their hands (see figures 3 and 4). Likewise, Tourgée described the Klan as a religious body, albeit a heinous and vile expression of faith. In *A Fool’s Errand*, he called them a “band of Christian Thugs” (1879: 247). He recognized that Christian men readily joined the Klan: “Grave statesmen, reverend divines, legislators, judges, lawyers . . . all who could muster a good horse, as it would seem, joined the [Klan]” (1879: 304). “They are most of them church-members,” Tourgée recounted, “and all of them respectable” (1880: 252).

[14] In addition to agreeing that the Ku Klux Klan constituted a quasi-religious organization, both Tourgée and Dixon portrayed white churches as powerful forces in southern social life. Churches, in fact, offered southern whites a geography of resistance against northern intruders. For Tourgée, these churches functioned as the symbolic location of either social acceptance or social ostracism for northern immigrants. When southern whites sought to “expel” Yankee invaders who desired to better African American lives, the first step involved rejection from the church. In *A Fool’s Errand*, southern whites initially show their disdain for the northern protagonist and his wife at church. “We do not often go to church now,” the carpetbaggers lament, “there is constant coldness, which says, plainer than words can, that we are not wanted” (1879: 104). Other northerners also complain about religious ostracism. One man comments that his name was immediately “dropped from the church-roll” after he had defended black manhood suffrage (1879: 107). Others “were excluded from the Lord’s Communion for establishing Sabbath schools for colored people” (1879: 142). Such isolation, Tourgée maintained, deeply affected northern whites in the South as Yankee schoolmarm found ostracism heart wrenching. Tourgée described one female missionary’s response to separation as such: “her heart was sick of the terrible isolation that her position forced upon her” (1880: 218).

[15] Through a more positive portrayal, Dixon similarly described the southern church as a powerful institution. “In the village,” he penned, “the church was the center of gravity of the life of the people. . . . [E]verybody who could . . . went to church” (1902: 38). Along with the church’s preeminent role, Dixon considered the southern pastor a critical molder of opinion: “as an organiser and leader of opinion he [the preacher] was easily the most powerful man in the county, and one of the most powerful in the state” (1902: 37). In sum, Dixon and Tourgée positioned the southern church as the hegemonic arbiter of southern mores and practices.

⁵ Dixon described the Klan as a group of Christian ministers in some of his other Reconstruction novels (1912: 22-23). With the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, Dixon began differentiating the Klan of the 1860s with the latter one. In fact, he despised the twentieth-century Klan because it targeted groups other than African Americans (for a discussion of this point, see Bloomfield: 395).

[16] Both writers also recognized connections between faith and politics in both southern white culture and southern black culture. African American society, Tourgée penned, fused the secular and the sacred. Describing an African American political rally, he contended “the political and religious interests and emotions of this people are quite inseparable. . . . Their religion is tinged with political thought, and their political thought shaped by religious conviction.” Due to this connection, Tourgée even suggested, “in this respect the colored race in America are the true children of the Covenanters and the Puritans” (1880: 184). African American freedpeople, he maintained, were the religious progeny of the colonial Puritans who sought to create a religio-political “city on a hill.” The influence of black preachers, moreover, “was very great” and had incredible power in shaping the African American community (1880: 68). Postwar African American culture, Tourgée rightly observed, intertwined religion and politics. Dixon recognized a similar phenomenon in southern white society. In an exchange between two southern whites about religion and politics, one contends that the emergence of free African American voters made politics a religious arena. “To me,” he claims, “politics is a religion. . . . I believe that the State is now the only organ through which the whole people can search for righteousness.” In short, only through politics could southern whites save their beloved racial hierarchy and redeem the South. Freed blacks, thus, had sanctified white supremacist politics. (1902: 284)

[17] Finally, both Tourgée and Dixon, with their radically different racial attitudes, looked to religion as a means to reunite the North and the South. For Dixon, the Spanish-American War of 1898 stood as the culminating event of regional reconciliation because it was at heart a holy crusade of racial imperialism. “We believe that God has raised up our race,” he penned, “as he ordained Israel of old, in this world-crisis to establish and maintain for weaker races, as a trust for civilization.” Later, one of Dixon’s pro-imperialist characters proclaims, “I believe in God’s call to our race to do His work in history” (1902: 439, 440). Although Tourgée wrote his Reconstruction novels well before the Spanish-American War, he also believed that religion would be necessary for regional reconciliation. Unlike Dixon, though, he saw faith as a critical component for future African American equality and for the dismantling of white racism. Concluding *Bricks Without Straw*, he looked forward to a time when religious virtues would triumph over prejudice: “The soil which slavery claimed, baptized with blood becomes the Promised Land of the freedman and poor white. . . . Ignorance marvels at the power of Knowledge. Love overleaps the barriers of prejudice, and Faith laughs at the impossible” (1880: 521). Paralleling the critical virtues articulated by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians of “faith, hope, and love,” Tourgée invoked those of faith, knowledge, and love as the key ingredients to an egalitarian and reunited America.

Conclusions

[18] Clearly, religious motifs, characters, institutions, and practices played important roles in how Tourgée and Dixon articulated racial, gender, and sectional issues after the war. Indeed, their works conflict with one another on numerous levels. While Tourgée championed African American rights, Dixon denounced them, and while Tourgée praised the Yankee schoolmarm, Dixon fumed at them. However, there were some striking similarities in the ways they saw religion functioning in the postwar era. Both acknowledged the religious nature of the Ku Klux Klan; both observed the social authority wielded by southern white ministers and the use of the churches as locations of resistance; and both recognized the interconnectedness of politics and religion. Finally, Tourgée and Dixon described religion as a powerful and creative force in the postbellum nation, one which played a crucial role in reconciliation and change. Dixon and

Tourgée would have agreed with another Civil War and Reconstruction novelist, Paul Laurence Dunbar, when he concluded that “it was not flesh and blood, but soul and spirit that counted now” (1901: 90). Ultimately, as this study has shown, attention to “soul and spirit” opens new doors for interpretations of Gilded Age novels about the Civil War and Reconstruction and of the society they reflected. Race and gender were critical, but they were often explained and mediated by religious beliefs and language.

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