

W. Jason Wallace, *Catholics, Slaveholders, and the Dilemma of American Evangelicalism 1835-1860*. 208 pages. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. \$30, paper.

During the last two decades, scholars of antebellum history have written several important studies of the growth of American nationalism. Peter Onuf, Susan-Mary Grant, and Harlow Sheidley, to name only three, have considered the ways in which American nationalism adopted sectional and religious overtones. The nationalism of the antebellum North emerged triumphant from the Civil War and asserted that it represented the authentic American tradition. Northern nationalists regarded all other claimants as frauds. The religious certainty of these assertions originated in the antebellum period from the evangelical Protestantism emerging from the Second Great Awakening. W. Jason Wallace, assistant professor at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, seeks to expand this story by examining the relationship among northern and southern evangelicals and Catholics during the antebellum period.

Prof. Wallace's excellent *Catholics, Slaveholders, and the Dilemma of American Evangelicalism, 1835-1860* examines the interaction among three groups, northern evangelicals, southern evangelicals, and Catholics, during the antebellum period to reveal the failure of American Protestants to transform the United States into "an evangelical republic" (149). Wallace uses the perspective of northern evangelicals to demonstrate the failure. The United States of America lacked a national religious establishment, challenging the older idea that only a state religion could preserve social order. Many Protestants, far from resisting the separation of church and state, embraced religious freedom and believed that evangelical Christianity could offer proper moral grounding for the country. Evangelicals stressed the individual conversion experience rather than doctrinal unity and a common morality based on the "authority of private conscience as informed by the Bible" (69). They also provided a common historical narrative to support their beliefs. America, evangelicals constantly repeated, was a Protestant nation, and American freedom and progress derived from its Protestant, particularly New England, heritage (60). As the second Great Awakening spread evangelicalism throughout the country, many Protestants believed that God had called them to reform the nation along godly lines. The temperance crusade was the largest national reform movement, but two issues particularly mobilized northern evangelicals: anti-Catholicism and anti-slavery. As the vigorous reform movement of

the 1830s and 1840s commenced, northern evangelicals “initiated a twenty-five year political and religious struggle that culminated with the collapse of the Second Party System and the conflagration of the American Civil War” (1). Southern slaveholders, many of them evangelicals themselves, and Catholics bore the brunt of northern evangelical nationalism. In order to make the United States a godly republic, northern evangelicals had to rid the nation of these twin evils. In the meantime, their campaign revealed the inability of evangelical Protestantism to provide a common basis for social order.

In the first three chapters, Wallace argues that theological innovation and historical experience led northern evangelicals to develop their anti-Catholic and anti-slavery crusades. Northern evangelicals advocated millennialism and a “modified Calvinism” that did not stress original sin, separating them from many southern evangelicals (33). Their commitment to millennialism allowed northern evangelicals to argue that social activism and reform could establish the Kingdom of God on earth. But, millennialism also taught northern evangelicals to look for enemies when their efforts at godly reform were unsuccessful. Significant immigration from Ireland in the 1830s and 1840s led northern evangelicals to attack Catholics as tyrants who were unfit for republican citizenship. Northern evangelicals also made historical arguments against the medieval Church, noting that Catholicism had long stood against human freedom and progress. Thus as long as Catholics held fast to their religious identity and theological traditions, they could not be assimilated into the United States. Northern evangelicals’ war against slavery “shared the same premise” as their anti-Catholic crusade (71). Just as Catholics were tyrants who held people in spiritual bondage, slaveholders violated the principles of American freedom and held people in physical bondage. Like Catholics, slaveholders held up the cause of reform and thus blocked the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. For northern evangelicals, slaveholders had to be overcome. Ultimately, this came through the violence of the Civil War, a war many northern evangelicals fervently supported.

In chapters four and five Wallace demonstrates that southern evangelicals and Catholics actively resisted their demonization by northern evangelicals. Politics, as the saying goes, makes strange bedfellows; in this case, “Catholics and proslavery southern conservatives, put forth substantial and at times similar arguments challenging what they believed to be an erroneous and ill-conceived Protestant political theology” (1). The nativist campaign, while present in the South, was weak in comparison to its counterpart in the North. Wallace points out several instances in which prominent southern

politicians and intellectuals defended Catholics from unfair attacks (94-95). Even southern evangelicals showed restraint in attacking the small, but significant Catholic population of the South. Southern evangelicals developed a new “historical-theological narrative” during the 1850s that “tried . . . to reverse the northern evangelical historical-theological narrative of the previous thirty years” (110). Critical of the French Revolution, egalitarianism, and theological liberalism, southern evangelicals found allies among many Catholics. The American Catholic hierarchy “worked hard to keep the Church out of sectional conflict” (113). But, certain issues, like slavery, could not be avoided. Wallace perceptively recognizes that antebellum Catholic discussions of slavery began from premises of Catholic moral theology and, therefore, had a different emphasis than the southern evangelical defenses of slavery (120–122, 144). Catholics opposed northern evangelical political theology for different reasons than their southern evangelical allies. In addition, Catholics like Bishop John England of Charleston and Bishop John Hughes of New York offered reasoned defenses of Catholic positions and countered northern evangelical (and southern evangelical, I might add) interpretations of medieval history. The Catholic hierarchy believed, Wallace tells us, that “American political conditions were to be valued and protected, but contra the evangelical narrative, they were not to be interpreted as the outworking of the kingdom of God on earth” (150). In this way, Catholics rejected the evangelical construction of American nationalism.

Wallace concludes that the campaign to make evangelicalism the basis for the American social order failed primarily because evangelicals “found themselves vulnerable to the perennial criticism that troubled every Protestant country since the Reformation: the problem of unity and authority when there was more than one claimant to ecclesiastical authority” (3). That northern evangelicals and southern evangelicals both appealed to the Bible as their authority on important political questions such as slavery showed that evangelicalism could not serve as a stable basis of social order. Doctrinal differences could not always be kept separate from politics. When Catholics answered evangelical attacks with their own reasoned arguments, evangelicalism’s claim to promoting social unity was discredited further. Wallace insists, “Antebellum politics betrayed the unity evangelicals so desperately desired and in consequence exposed the dilemma of American evangelicalism” (148). While frustrated in their attempts, post-war evangelicals “still desired a national character shaped in their own image” (152). Wallace suggests that the legacy of the antebellum evangelical experience was to create an “incessant quest for political and

cultural relevance” among evangelicals in an attempt to define “the national narrative” as their own (152).

Wallace’s book is well-written, concise, and very readable. It also raises questions that could provide avenues for further research or the adjustment of existing historical arguments. If Wallace is correct in his assessment, how did the Civil War and the end of slavery influence the relationships between southern evangelicals and southern Catholics? Did they separate further, now that the main issue at hand, slavery, had changed? Did the War, which divided Catholics as well as evangelicals, change the way northern evangelicals related to northern Catholics, many of whom served in the Union Army? Wallace should give historians of nineteenth-century American Catholicism much to consider.

Adam Tate
Clayton State University