
reviewed by Pearl J. Young

The Civil War has typically been considered the product of sectional conflict that pitted North against South, free states against slave, industry against agriculture, and progressives against conservatives. April E. Holm’s *A Kingdom Divided* challenges scholars’ assumptions of these clear-cut divisions by interrogating the records of churches in border states that spent the greater part of the nineteenth century struggling to maintain a neutral identity in an increasingly bifurcated America. She argues that religious conflict in these states, particularly the ongoing dialogue over schisms within the evangelical denominations, illuminates the larger issue of political turmoil in the contested regions of the United States.

Holm defines the “border states” rather loosely as those geographic regions where both northern and southern branches of the evangelical denominations—Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian—operated. Although hesitant to give a formal geographic definition of this region, Holm assures the reader that it is not synonymous with the divide between free and slave states, the Mason-Dixon line, or the border between loyal and seceding states. The most that can be pieced together is that the region includes the slave states of Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, Missouri, and western Virginia together with the southern portions of the free states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.¹

Relying on personal papers, denominational newsletters, and printed sermons, Holm posits that border state evangelicals were reluctant to engage in political conflict, particularly when they saw political issues spilling into their religious and moral lives. In the antebellum era, so-called neutrality meant remaining in the original denominations and promoting spiritual unity. During the war, political neutrality was criminalized by military authorities who saw the border region as strategically important for a victory over the Confederacy. This persecution continued into the postbellum era, effectively pushing border evangelicals out of northern churches and into their southern counterparts.

*A Kingdom Divided* challenges the typical narrative of Civil War and Reconstruction by expanding secession beyond the traditional 1861–1865 timeline and by complicating the sphere of Reconstruction. Holm, like other scholars, traces secession to the 1830s and 1840s schisms within the major evangelical denominations.² Yet Holm lengthens the secession period by highlighting the reality that churches in border states like Kentucky and Missouri abandoned their northern affiliations for the more conservative southern churches in the 1870s and 1880s. In this “postwar secession,” border churches retained their antebellum rejection of the northern political condemnation of slavery while legitimizing the postwar status of the southern denominations. Holm’s conclusion that “Confederate defeat made neutrality impossible” should give historians of Reconstruction and reunion pause.³ While considering the contests of both northern and southern churches over the control of the postwar South, Holm goes further by suggesting that the complexity and failure of religious Reconstruction was not merely the result of a political and military agenda that neglected social and cultural institutions but also the outgrowth of antebellum schisms. If the failure of Reconstruction can be tied to antebellum ideology, scholars could consider the roots of postbellum chaos as products not merely of Andrew Johnson’s incompetence and power struggles within Congress, but also of regional forces exacerbated by military conflict.

By examining polemical denominational histories in Chapter 8, Holm makes a compelling case for the role of border states in creating the Lost Cause narrative as well as


new origin stories for sectional denominations. She draws a convincing parallel between border claims of orthodoxy and border critiques of the politicization of the church with postbellum polemics. The border narrative of division over theology rather than slavery, of resistance to political preaching, and of wartime persecution became the mainstream story of the formation of the southern Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches. Similarly, the border narrative of righteous abolition, the politicization of the southern church, and antebellum suffering due to southern betrayal was exaggerated to become the dominant story of northern denominations.

Although *A Kingdom Divided* highlights the critical role that border states played in nineteenth-century sectional conflict, Holm's use of “border evangelicals” and “border moderates” leave some clarification to be desired. It is unclear whether these people and churches constitute the border regions because they held moderate positions, or if they were moderate precisely because they lived in a politically fraught geographic region. Do these patterns of commitment to religious purity and political neutrality only exist in border regions? Is there such a thing as a Southern moderate? Were some border evangelicals radical in their political opinions? Holms seems to suggest that radicals who lived in border regions were transplants, an assumption that complicates her claims of a trend of border neutrality.

Whatever its limitations, *A Kingdom Divided* accomplishes more scholastically than it sets out to do. This study of evangelical churches in contested border regions challenges the notion of antebellum Southern exceptionalism. The magnitude of the border region geographically and its impact on regional and national politics from 1830 to 1890 challenges any notion of the South as a rigid and insular region and highlights the role of the West in becoming a battleground for sectional affiliation even in the evangelical context. Holm's analysis adds to existing scholarship on secession as a cultural and ideological phenomenon and suggests a new understanding of Reconstruction's failure as a product of antebellum tensions. Further, Holm's book complicates the “national” nature of American religious denominations and opens the way for more careful studies of the significance of religious choice on the individual level. Finally, her work calls into question the assumption that schism and sectionalism can be understood solely in terms of antebellum churches without considering how such conflict continued into the postbellum era.

Many thanks to Danielle Balderas, who provided the cover image for this volume. Volume 6's cover features a single flower in a simple vase, a metaphorical representation of this volume's theme: institutions and the body. Flowers have often been taken to represent the human body, a symbol we borrow now. In conjunction with this, we take the stark white vase to represent institutions-- political, social, economic-- which constrain the human body and shape our interactions with the world.