THE
BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS

NO. 113: OCTOBER 29, 2015

MARK NOLL is the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame and author of numerous books. He spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator Suzanne Hevelone about his recent book, *In the Beginning Was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life, 1492-1783* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

HEVELONE: We're here today to talk about your new book, *In the Beginning Was the Word*. You've written prolifically about the influence of religion on the United States, and we're wondering how this book on the Bible differs from your previous books on Christianity's historical role in American public life. In other words, why write this book?

NOLL: In some sense other things I've written were a spinoff of an earlier concern for the public use of the Bible. This project got underway in the late 1970s at a time when the evangelical part of the Protestant world, of which I'm a member, was exercised about questions concerning the doctrine of the Bible, or what the Bible was and, to some extent, questions about how it should be interpreted.

Then with a real nice crop of younger historian friends, it occurred to us to ask, what about how [the Bible] has actually been put to use over time? That led to a conference in 1979 at Wheaton College called "The Bible and American Culture," leading to a book that I edited with Nathan Hatch. My assignment for that one was to talk about the Bible between the American Revolution and the Civil War, and, in some sense, that's set the pattern for most of what I've done since that time. That work includes a fairly major study on the way in which main forces in American history shaped theological formation, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Then a book followed more specifically

on the Civil War, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*. These are both subsets of this effort trying to figure out how the Bible was put to use in public.

The book that's just come out was intended to be a 75-page preface to the 19th century, where things get really interesting.

HEVELONE: That's the second volume coming, right?

NOLL: If I can do it that's the intention. Things really get interesting because you have carryovers from the colonial revolutionary period, where a strong influence from Britain's Protestant heritage strongly shaped the colonies and then the United States of America. That influence was British-Protestant. Yet by the 1790s and the early 19th century, Americans don't want to perpetuate British Christendom.

What happens to a confused and an at-sea population when something dramatic changes in how the public life is configured? What happens in the 1790s, 1800s and following is an effective mobilization of evangelical Protestant groups that are not committed to formal Christendom. The Methodists, the Baptists, the Disciples and then the older groups, Presbyterians and Congregationalists, start to act as if they don't care about the establishment. You have a massive Christianization of the public at the same time that Catholic populations are increasing. Already in the 1790s you find the Catholic Bishop John Carroll saying, "Well no, the Bible doesn't belong just to the Protestants. We actually have a better angle on it."

By the 1830s, '40s and '50s, there is also a substantial Jewish community in the United States. By the 1870s and '80s, there is a great deal of freethinking. All of these groups, also with

much internal diversity, make claims based to at least some degree on their own appropriations of Scripture. Yet with all these complications in the 19th century, the influences from the colonial period continue. Since the British Protestant colonial period depends strongly on the Protestant Reformation, I start this recent book with Martin Luther, and then the British history that leads to the King James translation of the Bible, which is first an intensely political history and then a literary history, and only thirdly a religious history. There is great controversy in Britain from the late 16th century right into the 1660s about how the Bible should be related to public life. The failure of the Puritan Revolution in England ends that discussion. The Bible is going to be important but it's not going to be the dominant authority even for serious Protestants in the way that it will continue to be for New England Protestants and then eventually for other Protestants in the United States. By the time that background was treated, I was about halfway through this book.

What did the Protestant profession to follow the Bible mean in colonial America? It meant quite a lot. By the time of the French and Indian wars and then the American Revolution, the colonial use of the Bible aligns with the Whig politics of the day. Passages like the fifth chapter of Galatians that speaks about freedom become really important.

When we arrive at the Revolution, there is a great debate over how to interpret the 13th chapter of the Book of Romans – "Let every person be subject to the higher powers, because they're from God" – a favorite passage of the Loyalists. But patriots also presented some good counterarguments pointing out, for example, that the Book of Romans was written by the Apostle Paul who at different times rejected authority. In general, much back and forth debate went on that drew on Scripture to decide whether it was appropriate to break from Britain.

In the same period, during the late 1760s and 1770s, a different debate took place on whether there should be an Anglican bishop in the colonies. A tremendous groundswell of serious Bible exposition contended for and against a bishop. There was also, in the late 1760s and early 1770s, explicit biblical argument over slavery, argument that had mostly vanished earlier in the 18th century. In addition, when British Protestant colonists were fighting against France, they were very conscious of their self-identity as Bible people. In their eyes, the French papists were tyrants and people who did not believe the Bible.

"Coming out of the 18th century, we see both this strong attachment of the Bible as a structure of the British empire and a strand of Bible religion that is not quite oblivious, but almost oblivious, to the political sphere. That combination defines the beginning of the history of the Bible in the new United States."

Yet for great swaths of colonial life, including thinking about slavery and race, there's almost no biblical attention, as there is also little biblical attention to the questions of economics and not much explicit biblical attention to political thought. It's just that the main British traditions are garnished with biblical rhetoric.

In the 18th century the Bible is conventionally British, but then it is turned toward specifically American concerns. Complicating the colonial story is the mid-century revival that's called the Great Awakening, where leaders are establishmentarian Christians. George Whitefield is an Anglican clergyman. Jonathan Edwards is a state church Congregationalist. Yet their emphasis on the Bible is direct, immediate and not too much interested in the structures of British colonial Christendom. The revival explains why only in the 1740s and '50s you begin to get a serious African American attachment to Christianity.

Most efforts at Christianizing slaves in the 17th and early 18th century came from the Church of England, which was supportive of the structures of British colonial life, structures that either encouraged or allowed for slavery. Anglican ministers did mount efforts to Christianize slaves. They just didn't work, in part because, once slaves learned to read, they found passages in the Bible they could enlist against the slave system. In the 1740s and 1750s, evangelical religion has an obvious appeal to African Americans. From the very first publications by African Americans, you read intense reliance on Scripture – in effect, there is a biblical black Atlantic. It is in fact difficult to find anything published by an African Briton or an African American or African Caribbean that is not intensely committed to the Scriptures – and almost entirely oblivious to Britain, wars with France, or the imperial struggle.

Coming out of the 18th century, we see both this strong attachment of the Bible as a structure of the British

empire and a strand of Bible religion that is not quite oblivious, but almost oblivious, to the political sphere. That combination defines the beginning of the history of the Bible in the new United States, which is the book I'm working on now.

I've already written a few shorter pieces on 19th-century developments, and I will be trying to bring the story into the early 20th century, where for different religious groups there are many different religious reasons for adhering to the Bible. But there are also non-Christian groups who adhere to their versions of Scripture for other reasons. And there is still a heavy overlay of political usage of the Bible.

One of these earlier pieces was a long paper on the celebration of the King James Version in 1911. Within a matter of weeks in the spring of that year, Woodrow Wilson, aspiring to be president, Teddy Roosevelt, former president, William Jennings Bryan, multiple times a candidate for the Democrats – all gave speeches on the King James Bible. Bryan's was still recognizably religious, we would say. Wilson's and Roosevelt's treated the Bible completely as a book propping up American democracy.

HEVELONE: Covenantal but not Christendom?

NOLL: Right. Covenantal but not Christendom, and in some sense a continuation of an informal Christendom, but not a particularly Christian Christendom. So maybe we'll get that far.

HEVELONE: I'm curious, maybe there's a prequel to this too? You say that the Protestant understanding of the Bible via the Puritans quickly overtook the Catholic introduction of the Bible in the New World. Why do you think this is the case?

NOLL: The prequel is that, in late 15th, early 16th century, the interesting people who are thoroughly engaged with the scriptures are folks like Christopher Columbus, Bartolome de las Casas and the first archbishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga, who in the 1530s is campaigning to have the Bible translated into Nahuatl or to make Scripture available in a simplified Spanish for natives. However, when the turmoil of the Reformation really gets under way, the Bible—the new Bible translations coming from Protestant lands—are put on the Catholic Index of Prohibited Books.

In Central America, local bishops take aggressive steps against the importing of the Reina-Valera Bible, which is the main Protestant translation into Spanish. Scriptures remain present with Catholics. Samuel de Champlain, for example, in early 17th-century Quebec, knows about the Bible, but it's the Bible folded into church documents.

The real prequel, however, goes back to the age of John Wycliffe, where you begin to find Protestantlike statements concerning *sola scriptura*, "the Bible alone." Wycliffe, for example, actually uses that phrase.

HEVELONE: The title of your book comes from opening line in the Gospel of John, and I liked what you wrote in the conclusion about why that is. I wondered if you would just talk about that briefly, for those that haven't had a chance to read the book yet.

NOLL: Originally the first line of the book was going to be "In the beginning the word was in Nahuatl," which I've stuck in there somewhere, because it was. The Spanish and Portuguese colonization of America brought the Scriptures along, and there's Spanish Catholic attention to the Old Testament. But since the book is oriented to the colonies that formed the United States, the story had to concentrate on Protestants.

"In the beginning was the Word" from John's Gospel became useful with just a bit of biblical interpretation. In John, the word – *logos* – means many different things. It's the word made flesh, so second person of the Trinity in Christian interpretation. It's the words that Jesus spoke. It's the written word of divine revelation. It's commandments. So it's multifaceted in the Scriptures.

Similarly, the history of the Bible in public life in colonial America is mul-

tifaceted and has many dimensions – several stories running alongside one another, with much influence going back and forth among these stories.

HEVELONE: I'm wondering about your reflections on the Bible and use in the public realm in America today. We had the Republican debate last night. I'm wondering if you see any antecedents in what you've written here or any changes contemporarily.

NOLL: I'm a faithful reader of the *South Bend Tribune*, where almost every week the letter column will include two or three examples of people quoting the Bible, usually from conservative points of view but not always. Occasionally a liberal Protestant Unitarian voice will also quote the Scriptures, or someone writing as a socially conscious Catholic voice will draw on the Bible as well. From whatever political angle, the Bible keeps showing up.

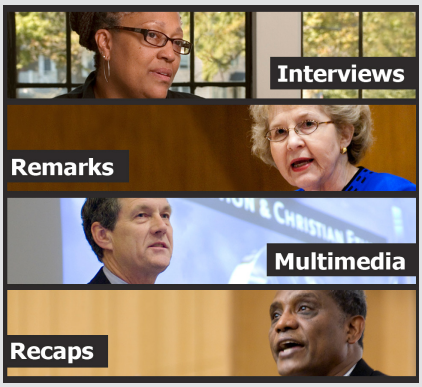
My own sense, however, is that by the early 20th century, the things that had made the United States in some sense a Bible-civilization had faded away. What are those things that have changed? The King James Version is still published (new polls suggest that maybe it's still the most used version of the Bible, which surprised me). Nonetheless, the way in which the language of the King James Version used to be common coinage of the realm is no longer the case. Abraham Lincoln was able to quote four times from the King James Version in 1865, the Second Inaugural Address, and he doesn't have to say "I'm quoting from the Bible." People recognized it. Martin Luther King in 1963 in the "I Have a Dream" speech, quotes from Amos and Isaiah and one or two other places in a kind of mixture. It's a little bit of Revised Standard Version, a little bit of the King James Version, but it's there. But I'm not sure if such references would be widely recognized today.

In addition, the public space in the United States is religiously plural in a way that it wasn't in much of the nation's past. So that is just a reality. A book that came up to the present would have to deal with other sacred Scriptures, such as the Koran, and then with the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Bible still is present in public life, but often only as a weapon for partisan political purposes. President Obama gave a talk at the National Prayer Breakfast three or four years ago, which was a remarkable effort. In twenty minutes, he quoted about fifteen Bible passages. He also quoted CS Lewis. His Bible quotations came from the Revised Standard Version and the New International Version. I'm sure he had speechwriters, but it's obvious from some of his offhand comments that he is quite familiar with the Bible. That was interesting in itself. But then the next day several Republican people of note slashed back to say, "Oh, what an abuse of the Bible." The President might have used something from the Scripture to at least indirectly support the Affordable Care Act, and of course the opposition reacted "this is just a terrible way of using the Bible." So the Bible was present but not in the way that it had been as a book demanding universal deference. In my own view, the Civil War did an awful lot to damage the public standing of Scripture, just because there was such strong Northern and Southern contention over who was reading the scriptures correctly.

A little cohesion comes back to Scripture during World War II, when Churchill and Roosevelt were able to say we're fighting as a Christian civilization against the Nazis. The Civil Rights Movement promoted something of a return to the Bible, but not with the universal presence that characterized the 1830s and 1820s. The way in which scriptural usage is simply woven into the fabric of life fades pretty dramatically by at least the early 20th century.

[END]



Visit **bc.edu/boisi-resources** for a complete set of the **Boisi Center Interviews** and audio, video, photographs and transcripts from our events.

The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life

Boston College
24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

tel 617-552-1860
fax 617-552-1863
boisi.center@bc.edu

boisicenter
@boisi_center
@boisi_center