

argues that the Gnostic goal of perfection is a perversion of the Christian concept of perfection. Gnosticism seeks perfection in this world via human means in contrast to Christianity, which views perfection as accomplished by supernatural means through grace in death (66).

The value of Voegelin's *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* is beyond words. Theologians should praise Voegelin's recognition of the spiritual foundations of political movements and his call for a greater sensitivity to transcendence in political analysis. And yet they should be sobered by his criticism as too often they themselves have eclipsed the divine when entering the political debate. Political scientists should praise Voegelin for returning to the fundamentals of the discipline. He is not simply interested in voting patterns and policy analysis, but in the soul of man and its implications for political order. This brings to mind Voegelin's concluding remarks from *The New Science of Politics*: "it will require all our efforts to kindle this glimmer into a flame by repressing Gnostic corruption and restoring the forces of civilization. At present *fate is in the balance*" (Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* [University of Chicago, 1987], 92, italics added). The stakes are high indeed, and the republication of *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* helps us to appreciate what is most important. We must never allow our discipline, our "science," to eclipse the larger horizons of reality, particularly things transcendent.

Jeremiah H. Russell  
Baylor University, TX  
jeremiah\_russell@baylor.edu

David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. x + 560 pp. \$35.00. ISBN 0-375-41188-7 (hbk).

On February 27, 1860, Abraham Lincoln needed to get some distance from John Brown. Brown was notorious for directing the execution of five unarmed civilians in Kansas and later leading a raid on the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. That raid ended in Brown's hanging, but opponents of Lincoln said that Brown's spirit lived on in the Republican Party. In his 1860 speech at the Cooper Institute—the speech that Lincoln said made him President—Lincoln defended himself and his party: "John Brown was no Republican; and you have failed to implicate a single Republican in his Harper's Ferry enterprise." Brown was a misguided "enthusiast" who thought he had a divine commission. Far from influencing the Republican Party, Brown's work ended "in little else than his own execution." Lincoln made a persuasive case, and he won the election in part because he managed to cast Brown out of the mainstream of American history. David S. Reynolds's great achievement in *John Brown, Abolitionist* is to bring Old Brown back in.

Reynolds frames the book as an exercise in "cultural biography," a genre he practised to great acclaim in *Walt Whitman's America* (1995). Cultural biography

treats culture not as the mere “context” in which a person acts, “but rather as a dynamic entity constantly seeping into the subject’s psyche and shaping his or her behavior” (9).

Cultural biography proves especially helpful in understanding John Brown. Even before he died, Brown was cast as a one-of-a-kind crank operating at the margins of history. Reynolds reverses this picture, patiently tracing Brown’s connections to Atlantic slave revolts, Transcendentalism, Puritanism, a changing economy, the culture of violence in Bleeding Kansas, and more. The connections reveal Brown not as a madman driven by some private revelation, but as one who synthesized so many disparate aspects of his culture that he began to transcend it.

The dense web of connections illumines the meaning of Brown’s actions. When he and his followers used broadswords to slaughter five pro-slavery men at Pottawatomie Creek in Kansas, for example, their choice of weapons reminded white observers of attacks by Native Americans and enslaved African Americans. It not only suggested a kind of solidarity across lines of race, but also called up exactly the images that terrified frontier settlers and slaveholding whites. Their use of broadswords forever shattered the image of the effete Northern Abolitionist. In a time when a Southerner could beat a Massachusetts senator to a bloody pulp on the floor of the Senate without fear of bodily retribution, Abolitionists with broadswords had a shocking quality that helped galvanize both South and North for war. Brown’s actions often took on symbolic dimensions, intended or not, and Reynolds’s cultural biography does more than any other book on Brown to help modern readers understand why he acted as he did and what his actions meant to his contemporaries.

Reynolds’s cultural biography gives primary importance to the role of religion in Brown’s life. Reynolds argues that Brown was a Puritan of the old school, a man born out of time. Brown studied Jonathan Edwards, but his real model was Oliver Cromwell. Like Cromwell, he did not hesitate to defy the laws of earthly powers in the service of the rule of God. He enforced strict moral discipline among his tiny bands of followers. He read the Bible without help or mediation. And he held such a high doctrine of God’s sovereignty that he could say that even the errors that led to his capture at Harpers Ferry “were decreed before the world was made” (25). Reynolds shows that Brown understood himself as an heir to Puritan traditions, and he delivers a cascade of quotations to show that Brown’s contemporaries, North and South, also recognized him as a Puritan. But the book does too little to flesh out just what it means to say that Brown was a Puritan. Reynolds clearly explains the Puritan influence on Brown’s willingness to break earthly laws to serve divine commands. But he could have done much more with Brown’s typological sense of history (and his own role in it). And Brown’s sense of the need for blood atonement for national sin cries out for the rich interpretation Reynolds gave the broadswords. On the morning of his execution, Brown handed one of his guards a note that read, “I John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crimes of this *guilty, land: will never* be purged *away*; but with Blood” (395). How did this vision of justice fit within the wider religious ecology of Brown’s

time? Reynolds offers hints and glimpses, but readers seeking a more thorough engagement with Brown's theology should consult the biographies by Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. and Stephen B. Oates.

Reynolds shines, however, in analysing Brown's influence after his death. (His analysis of the song "John Brown's Body" is especially keen.) Reynolds's Emersonian commitments show through in his emphasis on Brown's great influence as an individual. If, as Emerson wrote, an "institution is the lengthened shadow of one man," then Brown's long shadow "killed slavery, sparked the Civil War, and seeded the civil rights movement" (the book's subtitle; see also ix-x). Reynolds makes a solid case for each point. Even if all three of these "institutions" outrun the individual shadow of Brown, Reynolds succeeds in restoring Brown to a central place in any account of democracy in America.

This central role demands the attention of scholars who work in political theology and religious ethics. As advocates of democracy have become conscious of themselves as heirs to a particular set of traditions, historical studies of the thick, lived stuff of those traditions have become more important. Jeffrey Stout, Charles Marsh, Joan Martin, Gary Dorrien, Dwight Hopkins, Jennifer Herdt and others have all begun to explore the *Sittlichkeit* of democratic cultures. Reynolds's book joins those studies and demands that future works take account of Brown. Brown's significance breaks up too-easy dichotomies between minds formed by scripture and tradition, on the one hand, and minds formed to resist authority, on the other. And Brown's fusion of Cromwell's Calvinism and Locke's republicanism defies narratives in which the two are incompatible stages in the development of liberal society. When John Brown is back in the story, it has to become more complex.

Stories about John Brown especially complicate questions of religion and violence. Brown cannot be easily reduced to any of the positions on the standard lists of Christian stances towards war. He was surely not a pacifist, and he rejected in principle the just war tradition's demand for proper authority and in practice its demand for discrimination between combatants and civilians. And while Reynolds works hard to show the reasons Brown had for thinking that his attack on Harpers Ferry might succeed, it would be a mistake to think of Brown as a pragmatic warrior of *Realpolitik*. He was rather a Christian terrorist. He understood the symbolic power of violence, and he did not hesitate to use it against noncombatants. He believed himself to be acting as an agent of God's Providence. This did not mean that he thought he would triumph; it did mean that he believed that the blood he shed, including his own, might be caught up in God's work of redemption. Reynolds very tentatively suggests that Brown might be what Doris Lessing called a "good terrorist" (165). And one can make that case for Brown more easily than for someone like Timothy McVeigh because Brown's cause—and his belief that it could never be accomplished without bloodshed—now command such wide assent. But even if one is not persuaded by Reynolds's attempt to distinguish Brown from terrorists like McVeigh, his deliverance of Brown from a verdict of insanity forces contemporary considerations of religion, violence and political change to take Brown's views seriously.

Contrary to Lincoln's insistence that John Brown's influence died at Harpers Ferry, it has marched on through many of the social movements that have given democracy in the United States its distinctive shape. Brown's influence takes on new significance now, in a time when more and more people are losing faith in conventional political processes. No book does more to help us understand Brown's body, and his still-marching soul, than *John Brown, Abolitionist*.

Ted A. Smith  
Vanderbilt University  
ted.smith@vanderbilt.edu