

Proslavery and Sectional Thought in the Early South, 1740-1829: An Anthology, by Jeffrey Robert Young. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006.

Those accustomed to the extensive recent treatments on antebellum slavery will find a fascinating respite in Jeffrey Young's *Proslavery and Sectional Thought in the Early South, 1740-1829*. The work is an anthology representing thirteen contemporary rationalizations for allowing slavery during America's formative years. Young's treatment offers a corrective to the common tendency to place the emergence of proslavery ideology with late antebellum politicians pushing a dehumanizing agenda against African Americans. As demonstrated in these thirteen texts, the proslavery argument had "deeper, more tangled, and more substantial roots in Western political and religious thought" than is typically identified in current research (p. ix).

While the exact chronology of the proslavery emergence is difficult to trace, Young uses his extended introduction to place the work's central years in a more uniform context. Drawing heavily from Eugene Genovese's terminology, Young argues that the master-slave relationship was fundamentally "organic," as most believed slavery comprised a "natural element in the hierarchical society" first orchestrated by God (p. 5). It is extremely challenging to find proslavery arguments in previous centuries, as questions against the institution rarely arose. Both Plato and Aristotle held that slavery had its proper place in every societal model. Although the introduction of Christianity to the ancient world promoted the "value of freedom to an unprecedented degree," the religion continued to hold the institution of enslavement, creating what Young labels a "harbinger of the complex juxtaposition of slavery and freedom" (p. 14). As this balance between Christian freedom and slavery, influential thinkers in early American ideology, such as John Locke and Robert Filmer, went to great lengths to rationalize its ongoing existence. At the onset of the Great Awakening in the early eighteenth century, new intellectual authorities in the American colonies continued to emphasize the organic nature and essentiality of slavery. However, the evangelistic ministry of George Whitefield brought new questions about the treatment of slaves into the ideological landscape. Young does not contend that Whitefield took issue with slavery itself, but with the slaveholders denying the Christianization of their slaves. With a focus on individual conversion, Whitefield and his associates labeled these preventative measures as sinful. The personal conversion of slaves encouraged by Whitefield had further, perhaps more dramatic consequences in the historical evolution of proslavery thought. In urging slaveholders to recognize their "slaves' humanity and spiritual capacity, Whitefield rejected race a meaningful social boundary," thus clearly indicating the thoroughly organic nature by which these eighteenth century thinkers understood the concept of slavery (p. 32). Unlike the later antebellum proslavery logic that was built on racially-centered arguments, Whitefield and those in the wake of his influence upheld a primary focus on established societal stratification, regardless of race. Young argues that this influential, organic perception of human division persisted through the Revolution and Early-National years, into the antebellum years when proslavery thought took radical turns and came to be used as an instrument to "insulate the South from the moral standards of the outside world" (p. 51).

The essays themselves span both religious and political perspectives. Among the religious texts are George Whitefield, Samuel Davies, and William Graham each using

Biblical support to essentially argue that “Christianity was never designed to alter the political civil status of men, but only to bring them to the love of God” (p. 169). Perhaps more interesting, however, is Young’s representative political authorities on the subject, William Knox and William Smith, who argue that Southern plantation holders could reconcile the institution with Christian principles. Humane slaveholders, political authorities argued, “reward their slaves with working and living conditions superior to those of the laboring poor in free countries” (209). As a result, stronger personal ties were created between master and slave, thereby providing a greater social stability than found in Northern states. Thus, political entries not only justified slavery on scriptural and moral grounds, but found mutual social and cultural benefits to the institution’s continued existence as well.

While the sources in this anthology are only samples of the vast amounts of literature on the subject produced during the period, it would have benefited Young’s argument tremendously had he used more politically-focused examples. Of the thirteen representative articles, only three are from political sources. Even among these three, there appears to be a minor gap in representative political discourse between 1785 and 1818. Notable political figures such as Thomas Jefferson and John Taylor of Caroline made contributions on the subject during this period that certainly would have benefited Young’s overall treatment. A work dedicated to both the religious *and* political evolution in proslavery thought during the early American years should have both represented during the country’s politically formative years.¹

These caveats aside, Young’s argument is clear and incredibly well-researched. The extensive historiographic section in his introduction will provide an excellent resource for those unfamiliar with the recent scholarship on the subject. Further, his well-selected religious texts make an incredibly valuable foundation for further studies relating to Colonial intellectual developments spawned from the institution of slavery.

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¹ For further reading related to these early-national political considerations, see: Peter Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2000); Robert M. Calhoon, *Political Moderation in America’s First Two Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Garrett Ward Sheldon and C. William Hill Jr., *The Liberal Republicanism of John Taylor of Caroline* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008).