

Religion 466

Religion in The South

Fall 1995

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An Introduction To The Study of Religion in the South

When one thinks of religion in the South, the term "Bible Belt" may come to mind. First coined by H.L. Mencken in 1925, this phrase is suggestive of the prominent role played by religion in Southern culture. Mencken, of course, was dismissive of Southern culture, referring to it as the "bunghole of the United States, a cesspool of Baptists, a miasma of Methodism, snake-charmers, phony real-estate operators, and syphilitic evangelists." But he was not alone in recognizing the central role of religion in Southern culture.

In the 1920's, other students of the religion were also arguing a similar thesis. Under the leadership of Howard Odum and his students at the University of North Carolina, academic discussions of Southern religion tended to perceive religion in the region in largely sociological terms, seeing it as the principle bulwark to the distinctive social and cultural ethos; a point of popularized by W.J. Cash in his **Mind of the South**. Unfortunately, like Mencken, Odum and his followers focused almost exclusively on Southern evangelicalism, ignoring almost completely the religious experience of blacks as well as two traditions with deep roots in the South: Roman Catholicism and Judaism.

Although it has been slow in coming, a appreciation of the richness of expression to be found in Southern religion is emerging. This revision of earlier ideals began with Samuel S. Hill's **Southern Churches in Crisis**. Instead of seeing Southern churches as bulwarks of the *status quo*, Hill and others have come to see the primary focus of Southern religion as being a personal religious experience that serves to create a personal rather than a social ethic. Put another way, Southern religion is more concerned with saving souls than with saving society. Others have carried forward the process. David Harrell has argued in his **Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism** that Southern evangelicals do not come from a single mold. And a relatively unknown article by W. Frank Ainsley and John W. Florin entitled "The North Carolina Piedmont: An Island of Religious Diversity" (**West Georgia College Studies in the Social Sciences** 12 (1973) pp. 30-34) suggests that religious pluralism in the South had a long distinguished history in at least one part of the region.

Despite this growing recognition of pluralism and diversity, other recent scholars have found that the established patterns of Southern white Protestant hegemony, an unofficially "established" evangelical world view, and a popular fundamentalism have not lost their strength or influence. Harkening back to the sociological approach of Odom, John Shelton Reed provides supporting evidence for this view in a chapter entitled "'The Bible Belt': Southern Religion," in his book, **The Enduring South: Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society**.

In the course of this semester, we will be examining the issues raised by these scholars, as well as a wide variety of primary materials. Hopefully, by the end of the semester, each student will have developed an appreciation of the rich religious history of the South, as well as an awareness of the intellectual, moral, political, social and economic forces that helped mold the region and give it a distinctive ethos. For it was this diversity of culture that served to shape religious experience in the South, and it was religion, in turn, that helped to fashion and mold the values and vision of the region.

Resource Books:

Kenneth K. Bailey, **Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century** (1964)

Robert A. Baker, **The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People** (1974)

Wesley Craven, **The Southern Colonies in the Seventeenth Century: 1607-1689** (1970)

Virginius Dabney, **Liberalism in the South** (1932)

Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson, eds., **Jews in the South** (1973)

Hunter Farish, **The Circuit Rider Dismounts** (1938)

Samuel S. Hill, Jr. **The South and the North in American Religion** (1980)

_____, ed., **Encyclopedia of Religion in the South** (1984)

_____, ed., **Religion in the Southern States** (1983)

Eugene Genovese, **Roll, Jordan, Roll: the World The Slaves Made** (1974)

Donald C. Mathews, **Religion in the Old South** (1977)

James Oakes, **The Ruling Race**

Walker Percy, **The Second Coming**

Liston Pope, **Millhands and Preachers**

Albert J. Raboteau, **Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South** (1978)

H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, **American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents** (1960)

Charles S. Sydnor, **The Development of Southern Sectionalism: 1819-1848** (1948)

David Walker, **David Walker's Appeal** (1858)

Charles Reagan Wilson, **Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920** (1980)

Course Requirements:

There will be a mid-term and a final exam. The mid-term and final will **each** represent 37% of the course grade.

or

Each student will also be expected to prepare a paper concentrating on an area of original research of their choosing. Some suggested areas are: (1) regional differences in American religion (2) Fundamentalism (3) the role of women in Southern religion (4) the contributions of the Black church to American religious life, and (5) dissenting religious traditions. It is expected that the paper should be of publication quality. The paper will constitute 75% of the final grade. The paper will be of at least 20 pages in length, and each student will

present the results of his or her research to the class prior to the end of the semester.

In addition, students will also be evaluated on participation and discussion in the class room. Twenty-five percent of the final grade will be based on the student's ability to discuss and critique the assigned readings.

Course Schedule

Lecture and Reading Assignment

["Spiritual Bulimia"](#) Hill, **Religion in the Southern States**, pp. 383-422

["Virginia Puritanism"](#) Smith, Handy, and Loetscher, pp. 11-17; 41-53; Craven, pp. 60-182 (optional)

["The Great Awakening"](#) Mathews, pp. xiii-80; Hill, **Encyclopedia**, pp. 309-310

["Deism"](#) **The Jefferson Bible**

["The Second Great Awakening"](#) Mathews, pp. 81-135; **Encyclopedia**, pp. 311-313

["The Affirmation of Southern Perfection"](#) Sydnor, Chapters 1, 4, 5, 10, 13, 15; David Walker's Appeal; The remaining chapters of Sydnor (optional)

["Division Comes to the Denominations"](#)

["The Convenient Sin"](#) Oakes, Chapter 4

["The Religion The Slaves Made" \(Parts I and II\)](#) Jasper, **De' Sun do Move** (Handout); Raboteau; Genovese (optional)

[Theodicy and the South](#) Hill, pp. xi-89

["Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause"](#) Wilson, 1-182

["Orthodoxy Challenged: Religion, Race, and Learning"](#)

["The Triumph of the Southern Baptists"](#) Dabney

["Roman Catholicism in the South"](#) Read the article on Southern Catholicism in Samuel Hill, ed. **Encyclopedia of Religion in the South**

["Judaism in the South"](#) Read the article on Southern Judaism in **Encyclopedia of Religion in the South**

["Millhands and Preachers"](#) Read all of Pope, **Millhands and Preachers**

["The Breakdown of An Evangelical Consensus"](#)

["Letter from the Birmingham Jail: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Struggle for Civil Rights"](#) Articles on the March on Birmingham in **The New York Times**, April 13, 1963, April 14, 1963, **Birmingham News**, April 1, 1965. **Montgomery Advertiser**, March 21, 1965. For the text of "The Letter From the Birmingham Jail" [click here](#). This will be a research exercise.

["Emerging Trends in Southern Religion"](#)

"Southern Literature and Religion" Walker Percy, The Second Coming

"Southern Literature and Religion (Part II)

Paper Presentations (To begin November 27)

November 29, 1995 Presentation by Brian Moriarty

December 4, 1995 Presentation by Judy Petree

December 6, 1995 Presentation by Angela Clodfelter

December 11, 1995 Presentation by James Mitchell; Presentation by Renita Page

Office Hours:

Office hours are by appointment. You may call me at my home (766-9642) or my church office (725-7679) to make arrangements. The preferred means of communication is by E-mail, and I can be reached through the University computer system. My address is matthetl@wfu.edu and the URL of my home page is <http://www.wfu.edu/~matthetl>

Miscellaneous:

Karen and I have made a tradition of having my students into our home for a meal once or twice during the semester. Ideally, we would like to have you join us for dinner early in the semester to give everyone an opportunity to get acquainted.

To help me get to know you better, I would like each student to write his or her faith autobiography. It should be from 2-4 pages in length, and should convey what (if any) place religion plays in your day to day life. This is not a graded exercise, but will simply allow me to be aware of the various confessional traditions represented in the class.



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