

# Hard, Hard Religion: The Invisible Institution of the New South

John Hayes

In late July 1963, a 65 year-old former coal miner stood alone on the stage of the Newport Folk Festival. An evening mist swirled around him as a lone red spotlight shone. He plucked his banjo in a staccato style, sang in a thick, tense accent, and an “eerie chill” fell over the predominantly young audience of folk revivalists.<sup>1</sup> Dock Boggs sang of a harrowing confrontation with Death, a conversation in which he pleaded with Death to spare his life and give him time to repent, even as Death starkly insisted that his time was up and grabbed hold of him with its invisible icy hands.

Boggs was not a celebrity—in fact not really even a professional musician. He had recorded some remarkable, haunting songs in the late 20s for Brunswick Records’ “hillbilly” catalogue, but Boggs had spent almost all of his life in the coal mines on the western Virginia-eastern Kentucky border. After mechanization took away his job in 1954, Boggs and his wife struggled to live off their vegetable garden and the charity given by their church.<sup>2</sup> New York-born folk revivalist Mike Seeger found Boggs in Norton, Virginia in 1963, and persuaded him to come to the Newport, Rhode Island festival. There, Boggs mingled with a variety of other musicians from an older era, including John Lee Hooker, Clarence Ashley, Maybelle Carter, Jim Garland, and Bessie Jones and the Sea Island Singers, as well as with younger ones like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and the Freedom Singers.<sup>3</sup>

The song Boggs sang—usually called “Oh Death,” also known as “Conversation with Death”—circulated freely across the color line in the South from the 1920s to the ‘60s. Boggs was white, from the predominantly white coal regions of the Virginia-Kentucky border, but Bessie Jones, from the mostly black community of St. Simon’s Island, Georgia, had sung the song movingly, a capella, for folklorist Alan Lomax in 1960. Folklorist Todd Harvey has filled three journal pages tracing the song’s influence from Virginia to Louisiana, among whites and blacks, some obscure, others better-known like the Carter Family, Vera Hall, and the Stanley Brothers.<sup>4</sup>

The song, as Carl Lindahl has established, was the primary composition of Lloyd Chandler, a small farmer, preacher, and singer in the mountainous country of Madison County, North Carolina. Chandler had a terrifying, unwelcome vision in 1916, when he was twenty, as he lay drunk in a remote barn loft. Chandler felt Death grab hold of him, and he pleaded for his life, for time to see “if Christ has turned his back on me.” Chandler was in fact spared, and for sixty years after his vision, he sang of his “Conversation with Death.” The song terrified those who heard Chandler sing it, even those who knew him personally as a special friend to children and an advocate for the poor. That terror had a purpose, though, as one of his fellow preachers explained:

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<sup>1</sup> Witness recollection in the liner notes of *Goodbye, Babylon* (Dust-to-Digital, 2003), CD 3:24.

<sup>2</sup> Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 149-187.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Shelton, “Folk-Music Fete Called a Success,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Todd Harvey, Table 2 in Carl Lindahl, “Thrills and Miracles: Legends of Lloyd Chandler,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 41 (May-December 2004), 167-170.

the song evoked “how it would be to meet death and go out of this world without God.” It was an evangelistic summons, and Chandler traveled with it and sang to various audiences, but especially to churches—white and black.<sup>5</sup>

That’s not supposed to happen in the New South. In the twilight of the New South era, W.J. Cash wrote in 1941 of a “proto-Dorian bond,” a feeling of solidarity that united whites across class lines in a common culture of white supremacy.<sup>6</sup> White and black churches—institutionally separate since the tense years of Reconstruction—have, historians tell us, been vital to sustaining both white supremacy and black resistance to it. In 1972 Samuel Hill argued that through the white churches “secular traditions and values [the culture of white supremacy or the “Southern Way of Life”] have been ‘baptized’ and accorded legitimacy.” Hardly “asocial or apolitical,” the white churches, which expanded notably in membership in the period 1870-1930, fortified white supremacy through ideas of spiritual victory and purification, making for a “sacralized secular society.”<sup>7</sup> Even as he sought to complicate the picture, David Chappell could evoke this familiar, established image in 2004 when he wrote of “that impassable, snow-capped range of bigotry, hypocrisy, and social conservatism, the white church.”<sup>8</sup>

On the other side of the color line in the New South, we’re told, black churches became *the* principal institution for imbuing a sense of racial solidarity and resistance to the indignities of Jim Crow. In their influential 1933 study *The Negro’s Church*, Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson argued that “not finding the opportunity that is given to members of other racial groups in civic and political life, in business enterprises and social agencies, the Negro through the years has turned to the church for self-expression, recognition, and leadership.” Black churches thus embodied a unique role because they were “the Negro’s very own,” “the most thoroughly owned and controlled public institution of the race.”<sup>9</sup> Historian C. Eric Lincoln contrasted a “White Church [that] was invidiously racist” with a “Black Church” that was humanizing and life-celebrating in a 1974 collection.<sup>10</sup> William Montgomery reiterated the pertinence of this category in a 2005 essay: “the ‘black church’—thought of in terms of the broad historical development of African American religion—has been and remains, especially in the South, inseparable from the African American people, to a degree unlike any other Christian religious group in the country.”<sup>11</sup>



A black church in Georgia, circa. 1900. From “Negro life in Georgia, U.S.A.,” compiled and prepared by W.E.B. Du Bois. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-103393].

<sup>5</sup> Lindahl, “Thrills and Miracles,” 135-139.

<sup>6</sup> W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage, 1941).

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Hill, “The South’s Two Cultures” in Hill et al, *Religion and the Solid South* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 27, 36, 50.

<sup>8</sup> David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1969 [1933]), 9, 279.

<sup>10</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, ed. *The Black Experience in Religion* (Garden City: Anchor, 1974), 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> William Montgomery, “Semi-Involuntary: African-American Religion” in Charles Reagan Wilson and Mark Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South: In the Evangelical Mode* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2005), 80.

Anybody wanting tangible confirmation of these two categories—a “white church” on the side of racially-structured power, a “black church” at odds with and in resistance to such power—need only recall indelible images from the 1950s and 60s, when the Jim Crow order that emerged in and permeated the New South came under attack. One could look in 1963, not at the stage of Newport, but rather towards the streets of Birmingham. One could read, in his eloquent “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King’s deep disappointment with white churches—“archdefender[s] of the status quo,” he lamented—as they sanctioned violence through notable silence and timidity, or perhaps even actively through ideas of God-ordained racial purity.<sup>12</sup> The categories of “white church” and “black church” do have explanatory power, and the long line of scholarship, from the 1903 Atlanta University study *The Negro Church* to Samuel Hill’s 1962 “The South’s Culture-Protestantism,” to the 2000 collection *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African-American Religion* and Donald Mathews’ “The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice” demonstrates the close interweaving of religion and race in the New South era and beyond.

But, such categories do not capture all the dynamics of power and religion in the New South. In fact, they actively obscure a basic dynamic: how deeply impoverished people, white *and* black, found ways to speak religiously to each other, precisely in their common poverty. W.J. Cash’s proto-Dorian bond, or the primacy of race as a category of analysis for the New South, can become too self-evident, inhibiting any suggestion that whites and blacks might have found some common ground, that they might have cared passionately about other cultural messages than those of Jim Crow. We thus lack a solid historiographical context for making sense of the scope of a song like “Conversation with Death,” or of its composer’s behavior. A critic could argue for the essential unimportance of its crossing the color line, or for the irrelevance of white and black working-class musicians sharing a stage in 1963. I argue that the folk revivalists who sought out this older generation of working-class southerners and who listened to their music for a different, compelling sensibility, were on to something. Religion was not all they sought or all they heard, but it was an unmistakable element. Images from this “folk revival” of the 1960s—or from the more recent wave of interest sparked by the 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (for which Ralph Stanley sang “Oh Death” and won a Grammy; on whose soundtrack black and white gospel songs mixed rather easily)—can push us back to an older world, in which poor blacks and whites shared a religious sensibility not captured by the categories of “white church” and “black church.”

Consider a few suggestive pieces of evidence from regional observers hardly known for sugarcoating racial realities. W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1903 masterpiece *The Souls of Black Folk* painted a portrait of black religious life that has long been influential for images of “the black church.” Yet Du Bois concluded his “Of the Faith of the Fathers” chapter arguing for a “social conflict within” the black population, one that was manifest in religious life: “their churches are differentiating.” He also broached a suggestion that has had little interpretive afterlife. “The religion of the poor whites,” Du Bois argued, “is a plain copy of Negro thought and methods.”<sup>13</sup> A half-century later, Lillian Smith wrote to Fisk sociologist Charles Johnson of a rural church near her home in Rabun County, Georgia. “It is officially a white church. But they invite the Negro Baptists—over in the valley—to come very often to their church; and they go to the Negro Baptist church. I mean by ‘they;’ the entire congregation. Both Baptist rural groups (white and Negro) use my swimming pool for their baptisms. Last summer, the white group invited the Negro group to witness the baptism service. There were white and colored rural Baptists roaming all around my place.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther King, *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 96; Jane Dailey, “Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred After *Brown*” *Journal of American History* 91 (June 2004), 119-144.

<sup>13</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 1989 [1903]), 135, 145.

<sup>14</sup> Lillian Smith to Charles Johnson, 6/10/55, quoted in Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005), 111.

Looking less at religious activity and more at class identity, sociologist Leonard Doob made the following observation based on fieldwork in Sunflower County, Mississippi in the mid-30s:

The poor white prejudice against the Negro, however, is not strong . . . poor whites prefer to say of Negroes that "they can't help it [their poverty] either." . . . Real hostility is felt toward the planter class . . . When he hears the planter boast that "we are raising a mighty fine crop this year," [the poor white] wants to cry out and shout that it is he and his wife and children who have been 'chopping the cotton' and not the owner of the land and of the capital.<sup>15</sup>

Richard Wright ruminated in his 1941 history of working-class blacks on tentative class commonalities.

Sometimes, fleetingly, like a rainbow that comes and vanishes in its coming, the wan faces of the poor whites make us think that perhaps we can join our hands with them and lift the weight of the Lords of the Land off our backs . . . There is something "funny" about the hate of the poor whites for us and our hate for them. Our minds fight against it, but external reality freezes us into stances of mutual resistance. And the irony of it is that both of us, the poor whites and the poor black, are spoken of by the Lords of the Land as "our men."<sup>16</sup>

Two historians of New South religious life have argued for the presence of a religious sensibility that crossed the color line and spoke to a common class experience of poverty. In a 1991 essay on two literary giants of the New South, William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, Charles Reagan Wilson argued that both writers saw town churches "as embodying the complacency and self-centeredness of the modern world, but [that] those complacent churches do not exhaust the meaning of religion in the South." They sympathized instead with "those embodying a simple folk religion," with "the poor whites and blacks."<sup>17</sup> In his 2005 *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era*, Paul Harvey devoted a chapter to "racial interchange" in regional religious life. Harvey found such interchange in a variety of "folk" practices, practices like ecstatic worship, vision and conversion narratives, and vernacular music, forms which flourished among the working-class even in the face of attack by white and black "missionaries of bourgeois spirituality."<sup>18</sup> But, beyond Wilson's suggestive essay and Harvey's chapter-length sketch, a historical monograph that explores the meaning and practices of a regional folk religion does not exist. We have good historical studies of more contained religious forms. Deborah McCauley and Loyal Jones have cut through a web of stereotypes and showed that the white churches of impoverished Appalachia represented a complicated alternative to currents in mainstream American religion.<sup>19</sup> Albert Raboteau and Alonzo Johnson have gone back to the very "folk" practices denigrated by the black bourgeoisie,

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<sup>15</sup> Leonard Doob, "Poor Whites: A Frustrated Class" Appendix I in John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New Haven: Yale University, 1937), 471.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Viking, 1941), 46-47.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, "William Faulkner and the Southern Religious Culture" in Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1995), 62, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 114.

<sup>19</sup> Deborah McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1995); Loyal Jones, *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1999).

finding a paradoxical mood of “sorrow merging into joy,” rediscovering cultural materials that can enliven the contemporary projects of theology and moral philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

But a full monographic treatment of a “folk” religion across racial lines, a religion that was perhaps an alternative mentality not just to mainstream American religions but also to more-familiar southern forms, remains unwritten. Non-historians intrigued by and looking for such a stratum of regional religious life thus find minimal aid from the academy. In a review of the recent film *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*—yet another creation of outsiders (British blokes) heading South on the trail of a people’s culture fusing religion, music, and poverty—Charles Wilson criticizes the film for its lack of “historical and cultural context,” its “single-minded focus on working-class whites.”<sup>21</sup> That’s fair, but in a spirit of confessional professional candor, one might add that the filmmakers were helped little by the historiography: nobody has written a book-length study of a folk religion that permeates or once permeated the region from Appalachia to the Florida panhandle and the Louisiana Delta (locales in the film), nor have more than a few scholars (Wilson and Harvey) suggested the pressing need for analysis that treats regional religious life as an interracial phenomenon. The film’s lily-white ensemble of characters, its vagueness in locating the source of the religious music it is haunted by, are both indirectly sanctioned by the historiography.



A crossroads store, bar, juke joint, and gas station in the cotton plantation area, Melrose, Louisiana, June 1940. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-DIG-fsac-1a34361].

That sanction originated in the 1960s, through the pioneering work of historians Samuel Hill, Kenneth Bailey, Rufus Spain, and John Lee Eighmy. Their historical analysis carved out imaginative space for the category of a regionally-distinct form of white Protestantism, a white “southern religion.” In an American church history context that then narrated national religious forms as remarkably heterogeneous or as unfolding from Puritan New England (as late as 1972 Sydney Alhstrom could reiterate this logic in *A Religious History of the American People*),

it was vital to argue that white Protestantism had taken a rather different shape in the South, just as capitalism, or Progressivism, or party politics had. Religion in Dixie had its own history and dominating themes, and it demanded analysis in relation to but also in distinction from national models.

This was an important historiographical move, and one without which this journal would not exist. These scholars were all troubled as they looked out on the behavior of white churches in response to the Civil Rights challenge. They agreed with one of the principal arguments of King’s “Letter”—that white churches revealed a remarkable moral complacency in the face of a protest movement that appealed explicitly to Christian ideals. The question of how white churches had become so deeply accommodated to the southern social order thus became a point of departure for historical interpretation. The titles of some of these foundational works are well-known and

<sup>20</sup> Albert Raboteau, “A Fire in the Bones” in Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995); Alonzo Johnson, “‘Pray’s House Spirit’: The Institutional Structure and Spiritual Core of an African American Folk Tradition” in Johnson and Paul Jersild, eds., *‘Ain’t Gonna Lay My ‘Ligion Down’: African American Religion in the South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “Sacred Landscapes Barren of Redemption: A Review of *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus*” *Journal of Southern Religion* 9 (2006).

transparent in their tone of lament: "The South's Culture-Protestantism" (Hill, 1962); *Southern Churches in Crisis* (Hill, 1966); *At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists 1865-1900* (Spain, 1967); *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Eighmy, 1970); *Religion and the Solid South* (Hill and others, 1972).

Basic elements of this 1960s-generated model have had a long durability. First, regional white religious life was remarkably homogenous. Baptists and Methodists had gained the allegiance of over half the region's white population by the 1830s, and in the New South era their ranks increased notably, making for the powerful cultural bloc that H.L. Mencken lambasted as the "Bible Belt" in the 1920s and 30s, and that King could single out for disappointment in the 1960s (even as New South was giving way to Sunbelt). What Samuel Hill called the "Baptist-Methodist hegemony" had served as a kind of religious reiteration of W.J. Cash's "proto-Doran bond."<sup>22</sup> So dominating and unifying had they been that Hill argued unambiguously: white "cultural solidarity is the only honest opinion available."<sup>23</sup> Or, as he restated in 1979, "the South [in the New South era] was as solid religiously as in any other aspect, with perhaps party politics being its only formidable rival."<sup>24</sup>

Second, in their numerical and cultural power, the white churches displayed no prophetic or reform spirit. In fact they demonstrated the reverse. Implicitly or even actively, they gave powerful support to the regional power relations of white supremacy. Rufus Spain and John Lee Eighmy argued that white Baptist churches were comfortably complacent in their cultural power, with only minor impulses towards social reform or critique. Hill went farther, contending that white churches actively helped create the New South order of Jim Crow. They sanctioned white supremacy by "casting legitimation in the mold of ultimate truth," by inculcating a provincial mentality that taught whites that their society was "God's most favored."<sup>25</sup> It was no wonder, then, that white churches were ill-prepared to hear and confront the Christian appeal in Civil Rights, one that argued for a religious ideal over and above social traditions and practices.

Finally, white churches had been fixated on a narrow conception of what Christianity meant. They focused overwhelmingly on the conversion experience understood in personal, moral terms, and this focus had changed little over the course of two centuries. This ubiquitous emphasis on individualistic moral change explained such notable regional phenomena as prohibitionism and the absence of a "Social Gospel." It also explained another reason why white churches did not respond to the Civil Rights challenge of a changing society: there was little receptivity to religious social critique because "the southern church 'makes all of individual Christianity' and regards the conversion of men as virtually the whole task of the church."<sup>26</sup> Nor was there anything substantial in the way of a regional theology. The "old time religion" of individualistic conversion continued to work quite well for whites into the 1960s because, as W.J. Cash had argued concerning the appeal of early evangelicalism, "what our Southerner required . . . was a faith as simple and emotional as himself."<sup>27</sup>

These arguments—that regional whites were on the same page religiously, that their churches sanctioned the status quo, that moralistic conversion was their almost exclusive focus—have cast a long shadow. Subsequent major works on the New South from the '70s to the present have supported this model, or they have pursued different questions within the parameters

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), 34.

<sup>23</sup> Hill et al, *Religion and the Solid South*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Hill, *The South and the North in American Religion* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1980), 91; see also Kenneth Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 4: "As in politics the ascendancy of the Democratic party seldom was challenged, so in religion orthodoxy reigned supreme."

<sup>25</sup> Hill et al, *Religion and the Solid South*, 29-30, 36.

<sup>26</sup> Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, 73; see also Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism*, 18, 122.

<sup>27</sup> Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 58; also quoted in Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, 85.

established by it. In a 1971 article and 1975 monograph Frederick Bode examined the Populist critique of this "southern white Protestantism," arguing that Populists discovered in the 1890s that the white churches had become "mechanisms of ruling-class hegemony," that "the South's 'spiritual' religion was one of the most durable" barriers to social reform.<sup>28</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson's *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause 1865-1920* (1980) examined a synthetic "civil religion" of New South vintage, not southern white Protestantism per se, but he demonstrated that white religious leaders were active agents in crafting an elaborate Lost Cause mythology, one that, for example, sacralized Civil War battlefields as "Golgotha" and "Gethsemane."<sup>29</sup> Ted Ownby's *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South 1865-1920* (1990) stressed internal divisions among whites along lines of gender in its contrast of a "male culture" of aggressive competition with a predominantly female "evangelical culture" of self-control, but he argued that the evangelical culture ultimately triumphed and gained the clout to mandate its moral vision through reformist state legislation. Donald Mathews's provocative articles on lynching (2000, 2004) argued that white Protestant ideas of purity and punishment created the imaginative possibility for gruesome acts of vigilante violence. White "Southerners had become fascinated with other people's evil rather than their own," and violent punishment for this evil "was sacralized by the dominant religion of the American South."<sup>30</sup> And there were only a few lone voices of dissenting critique, because "a self-conscious, narcissistic purity had shriven evangelical white Christians of the capacity for understanding religion as either judgment upon themselves or service to the kingdom through the salvation of the other."<sup>31</sup>

White religious solidarity, supportive of white power remains the dominant image from the scholarship. Historians have pursued issues that challenge this model, finding a meaningful undercurrent of religiously-inspired reform.<sup>32</sup> Some have also argued that there was real religious diversity among whites (an argument to be examined later in this essay). But the model generated in the 60s holds up. As scholars turn their attention to more recent developments in regional life, particularly a "Religious Right" that has emerged in the Sunbelt South, they have invoked the older model. In a 2005 essay collection Samuel Hill called attention to different forms of religious life on the periphery of the South, but reiterated the idea of a homogenous mainstream: "for close to two centuries, a regional version of evangelical Protestantism prevailed as the pacesetter for the religious life of the people."<sup>33</sup> Andrew Manis argued that by the mid-twentieth century, "religious

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<sup>28</sup> Frederick Bode, "Religion and Class Hegemony: A Populist Critique in North Carolina" *Journal of Southern History* 37 (August 1971), 418, 421; see also Bode, *Protestantism and the New South: North Carolina Baptists and Methodists in Political Crisis 1894-1903* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1975).

<sup>29</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause 1865-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1980), 45 (quoting Baptist minister Carter Helm Jones at the United Confederate Veterans' 17<sup>th</sup> reunion in 1906).

<sup>30</sup> Donald Mathews, "The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice" *Journal of Southern Religion* 3 (2000).

<sup>31</sup> Donald Mathews, "Lynching is Part of the Religion of Our People: Faith in the Christian South" in Beth Schweiger and Donald Mathews, eds., *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004), 182.

<sup>32</sup> For a sample, not a comprehensive list, see Wayne Flynt, "Dissent in Zion: Alabama Baptists and Social Issues, 1900-1914" *Journal of Southern History* 35 (November 1969); John McDowell, *The Social Gospel in the South: The Woman's Home Mission Movement in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South 1886-1939* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1982); Wayne Flynt, "Southern Protestantism and Reform, 1890-1920" in Samuel Hill, ed. *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1988 [1981 conference]); Mary Frederickson, "Each One is Dependent on the Other: Southern Churchwomen, Racial Reform, and the Process of Transformation 1880-1940" in Nancy Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsack, eds. *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1993); Keith Harper, *The Quality of Mercy: Southern Baptists and Social Christianity 1890-1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1996); Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Women, Culture, and Community: Religion and Reform in Galveston 1880-1920* (New York: Oxford University, 1997); Samuel Shepherd, *Avenues of Faith: Shaping the Urban Religious Culture of Richmond, Virginia 1900-1929* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> Samuel Hill, "The Peripheral South: Florida and Appalachia" in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South*, 159.

and cultural dissent" was so scarce that white "moral custodians were largely free to envision a happily homogenous, WASPish Southland and nation."<sup>34</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson seemed to move away from his older idea of a religious vision shared by poor blacks and whites, arguing instead for the "long cultural hegemony of evangelical Protestants," for such an entity as "The Southern Church." That unified white group is in the present a "witness for social morality" and "the driving constituency of the Religious Right."<sup>35</sup> Paul Harvey argued that the racial interchange once notable among "folk" believers in the New South was no longer apparent. Rather, there exists a white "South that lines up overwhelmingly on the same side of moral and social questions." "White religious and cultural expressions [once] pervaded segregationist culture," and now they informed the Religious Right: "white southern evangelicals still live in the 'solid' South, but one that is solidly conservative Republican."<sup>36</sup>

The present thus adds to the durable persuasiveness of the old model: different South, but same white religious solidarity—now seeking to assert power on the national stage in the "culture wars." Maybe there is this kind of religious continuity from the 1960s to the present; testing that thesis is outside the scope of this essay. The question here is whether the model generated in the '60s, a model that holds up forty years later, adequately captures the dynamics of the New South era. Certainly the model spoke to the decade in which it originated, even as it has spoken to developments of the past generation. But does shed much light on the New South past?

Consider the image of the "Solid South." As noted, historians drew parallels between white political homogeneity and white religious uniformity: the established idea of a solid political South added weight to the subsequent argument for a proto-Dorian bond in religion. But, as J. Morgan Kousser, Lawrence Goodwyn, and others have demonstrated, the region's whites were hardly on the same page politically. Goodwyn showed that Populism was a genuine, substantive alternative to the social visions of the Democratic party, that in the Populist movement white and black farmers forged real allegiances, and that Populism was undone not by unanimity of opinion but rather by violence, fraud, ridicule, and legal disfranchisement.<sup>37</sup> Through rigorous quantitative analysis, Kousser explained how disfranchising legislation—the majority of which came in the 1890s as a response to the Populist challenge—stripped blacks *and* poor whites of the franchise. Voter turnout, which had been around 73% in the 1890s, dropped in the next decade to around 30%, and Kousser concluded his analysis with a poignant anecdote of a poor white man turned away from voter registration because of his illiteracy.<sup>38</sup> A "solid South" emerged after 1900 not because the region's whites didn't have rival views, not because the glue of white supremacy bound all whites together in a single party, but because both the mechanisms for maintaining competitive politics and potential rival constituencies had been nullified. The politics of the "solid South" era, from the turn of the century to the 1960s, rested on oligarchic exclusion, not incorporation into a herrenvolk Democracy. Perhaps, going back to the original extension of the analogy, the region's whites had different religious visions beneath an apparent homogeneity.

One example that fuses religion and politics may push the point some. In 1928, by popular referendum, the state of Arkansas passed an Anti-Evolution bill into law. According to the established wisdom, this was because Arkansas, like the rest of the region, was the bastion of an "old-time religion," a literalistic fundamentalism that shunned modern thought and had the

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Manis, "The Civil Religions of the South" in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South*, 170-171.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, "Preachin', Prayin', and Singin' on the Public Square" and "Mobilized for the New Millennium" in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South*, 9, 18, 197.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Harvey, "At Ease in Zion, Uneasy in Babylon: White Evangelicals" in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South*, 68; Harvey, *Freedom's Coming*, 167, 256.

<sup>37</sup> Lawrence Goodwyn, "Populist Dreams and Negro Rights: East Texas as a Case Study" *American Historical Review* 76 (December 1971); Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University, 1976).

<sup>38</sup> J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974), 224, 264.



cultural/political clout to fight it. Closer inspection of the “popular” referendum reveals, however, that some 18% of the voting age population actually voted in the election, that 11.5% actually said yes to the bill.<sup>39</sup> That’s hardly a ringing endorsement, and even the oligarchy that took part in the referendum held opposing views. Arkansas had a relatively low black population in 1930 (26%), so voter non-participation cannot be explained as simply racial exclusion. The state did have high rates of tenancy—in 1930 63% of the farms were tenant-operated. Such tenants suffered severe poverty, and few could pay the requisite poll tax. Perhaps, in their poverty, this large class of people took Protestantism in a different direction, one that spoke to subsequent folk revivalists even though it had no official political manifestation, certainly not in the 1928 referendum.

The question of poverty raises again the issue of interracial exchange, for millions of regional whites shared with millions of regional blacks an unenviable poverty. “By 1930 the margin separating the lives of poor rural folks, black and white, was narrow,” argues Jack Temple Kirby in his study of structural change in the rural New South.<sup>40</sup> But so far there is no interpretive space to imagine a religion grounded in a common rural poverty. Another legacy of the 1960s—the solidification of the idea of “the black church”—has also worked against such a notion.

One had to be practically blind to miss the prominent role that black churches played in the Civil Rights struggle. Sites of mass meetings, objects of violent reprisal, the cultural originating point for songs, images, and (perhaps) the idea of nonviolence, black churches were so evident in movement activism that sociologist and Civil Rights historian Aldon Morris described them as “the organizational hub of black life.”<sup>41</sup> Historians of religion who wrote in the wake of Civil Rights sought to account for and express this activist spirit, and (unlike the early historians of white southern religion who had to carve out space in an American religious history field) in this they were guided by an earlier body of literature, one that had already conceptualized the idea of “the black church.” This earlier scholarship—the 1903 Atlanta University study *The Negro’s Church* (edited by W.E.B. Du Bois, Kelly Miller, and Mary Church Terrell), Carter Woodson’s 1921 *The History of the Negro Church*, Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson’s extensive 1933 study *The Negro’s Church*, and E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Church in America* (published posthumously in 1964 but developing out of a 1953 lecture)—was all the work of intellectuals dedicated to racial activism, who meditated on practical ways in which racial consciousness and ideals of resistance could be taught and disseminated. For these scholars, no institution touched the masses of black Americans like their churches. Churches thus became important, in this interpretation, less for religion than for “race” consciousness and development.

“The Negro Church is a mighty social power today,” Du Bois, Miller, and Terrell wrote in their conclusion, “but it needs cleansing, reviving, and inspiring, and once purged of its dross it will become as it ought to be, and as it is *now*, to some extent, the most powerful agency in the moral development and social reform of 9,000,000 Americans of Negro blood.”<sup>42</sup> Mays and Nicholson concluded their study with an idealized portrait of “the genius of the Negro church,” arguing that it was “the Negro’s very own,” a unique space of “opportunity for the common man,” a place that gave “opportunity for self-expression that no other enterprise affords.”<sup>43</sup> In a similar spirit, Frazier argued that “as a result of the elimination of Negroes from the political life of the American community, the Negro church became the arena of their political activities. The church was the

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<sup>39</sup> Vote totals come from Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* 85-86; I calculated percentages from the 1920 and 1930 censuses, assuming even population growth throughout the 1920s.

<sup>40</sup> Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1987), 156.

<sup>41</sup> Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 5.

<sup>42</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois et al, *The Negro Church* (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2003 [1903]), 208.

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church*, 278-282.

main area of social life in which Negroes could aspire to become the leaders of men . . . For the Negro masses, in their social and moral isolation in American society, the Negro church community has been a nation within a nation."<sup>44</sup> A racist America, and especially a segregated New South, had elevated black churches to positions of heightened importance—they had become not just religious spaces but multifunctional “race” institutions.

Thus, as a new generation of scholars sought to understand black religious life in the wake of the 1950s and 60s, they came armed with this inherited model. The years of movement activity seemed to be an example *par excellence* of black churches as multifunctional race institutions.

Influenced also by emergent black cultural nationalism, these scholars solidified the concept of “the black church” and crafted an interpretation that endures to the present. In a 1974 collection, editor C. Eric Lincoln argued that “the Black Church represents the destiny for *all* of the black community. It encompasses the whole of the life of the black community and sustains and nurtures it.”<sup>45</sup> In a 1981 paper he pushed this model far back into the slave past: “the black church was the unifying agent that made of a scattered confusion of slaves a free people, a *Black American* people. The black church began as a religious society, but it was more than that. It was the black Christian’s government, social club, secret order, espionage system, political party, and impetus to revolution.” It had always played an essential role. “The black church has been womb and mother to a whole spectrum of black leadership of every generation of its existence [and] the most authentic representation of whatever it means to be black in America.”<sup>46</sup> Depicting a distinct “black Christian tradition” at odds with the “Western Christian tradition,” Peter Paris argued in *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (1985) that “the uniqueness of the black churches is seen in the fact that they are (as the literature constantly asserts) unequivocally ‘race institutions.’” Churches “have been the custodians of the black community’s most basic values.”<sup>47</sup> James Washington narrated the late-nineteenth-century formation of the National Baptist Convention—the largest black religious group then and now—as the story of the institutionalization of black cultural nationalism in *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (1986). In their extensive historical/sociological 1990 study, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya reiterated that “a qualitatively different cultural form of expressing Christianity is found in most black churches, regardless of denomination, to this day,” and they described this unique form as the “black sacred cosmos.”<sup>48</sup>

Historian Albert Raboteau agreed in a 1995 essay that “the segregation of black and white churches signified the existence of two Christianities in this nation,” that a “deep chasm . . . divided them,” and his own historical work since his pathbreaking 1978 *Slave Religion: The “Invisible*



The civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, March 1965. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ6-2329].

<sup>44</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken, 1974 [1964]), 48-49.

<sup>45</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, ed. *The Black Experience in Religion*, 24.

<sup>46</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, “The Black Church in the Context of American Religion” in Samuel Hill, ed. *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience*, 59.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), xii, 9.

<sup>48</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham: Duke University, 1990), 2, 7.

*Institution* in the Antebellum South has treated black religious life as a phenomenon whose story is told in isolation from white religious life.<sup>49</sup> "It makes little sense to insist that there is no such thing as a Black or an African American Christianity," pioneering historian of black religious life Gayraud Wilmore reflected in 1998. A distinct black Christianity has been "a social and cultural reality for more than four hundred years . . . during most of those years—like it or not—85 to 90 percent of all Black Christians have worshipped with their own race in all-Black conventicles or congregations. Certain characteristics of faith and life, belief and behavior, have resulted from that simple (we should probably say complex) fact."<sup>50</sup> The presence of such distinct characteristics, Larry Murphy wrote in the preface of the 2000 collection *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*, justified scholarly treatment of black Christians as a "discreet group," and his own article "'All Things to All People: The Functions of the Black Church in the Last Quarter of the Nineteenth Century" conformed to Frazier's model, claiming "ample historical basis" for the assertion that "the church has been at the center of black community life."<sup>51</sup> Thus historian William Montgomery's 2005 judgment, noted earlier, that there has been and is such a thing as "the black church," that the singular religious experience of blacks formed the basis for an "African American Sacred Cosmos," rests on a durable scholarly tradition and one that has received fortification since the 1960s.<sup>52</sup>

A number of historians, however, have gone back to source materials from the New South era—the very era that originated the concept of "the black church"—and discovered evidence that challenges the model of a unified, multifunctional race institution, the model that seemed to fit the churches of the Civil Rights era. Examining the activities of black churchwomen in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham found "class tensions" at work in bourgeois black women's struggle to gain social respect through embodying a distinct code of "respectable" behavior. "The zealous efforts of black women's religious organizations to transform certain behavioral patterns of their people disavowed and opposed the culture of the 'folk': bourgeois self-respect and racial uplift involved a conscious distancing from the slave past and the 'folk' present."<sup>53</sup> In *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900*, William Montgomery found "deepening social class divisions within the black community" by the late nineteenth century, and he argued that the preacher—often imagined as the consummate "race" man—suffered severe status decline by the turn of the century, as a new, educated bourgeoisie became "disgusted by the emotionalism, ignorance, and occasional moral lapse of the churches' old leaders."<sup>54</sup> *Opening Songs of Zion: The*

<sup>49</sup> Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History*, 188.

<sup>50</sup> Gayraud Wilmore, "What is African American Christianity?" in Larry Murphy, ed. *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion* (New York: New York University, 2000), 27-28.

<sup>51</sup> Murphy, ed., *Down by the Riverside*, 1, 133.

<sup>52</sup> William Montgomery, "Semi-Involuntary: African-American Religion" in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South*, 80. See also Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Orbis, 1998 [3<sup>rd</sup> edition]). For a religious critique of the multifunctional institution as more devoted to race than religion, see Joseph Washington, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 1964). For a dissenting view that black religious life has been marked by broad diversity, see Hans Baer and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1992).

<sup>53</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1993), 14-15. See also Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, 63-69, for New South era class divisions and the morality of respectability.

<sup>54</sup> William Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1993), 319, 328. For the black preacher as the quintessential "race" man, see C. Eric Lincoln, ed. *The Black Experience in Religion*, 65-67; Albert Raboteau, "'Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Forth Her Hands: Black Destiny in Nineteenth-Century America," in Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*; Timothy Fulop, "'The Future Golden Day of the Race: Millennialism and Black Americans in the Nadir 1877-1901" in Timothy Fulop and Albert Raboteau, eds., *African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

*African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*, James Campbell noted “a growing tendency to portray black life—and the ‘black church’ in particular—as unfolding in a separate realm, a realm simultaneously organic to those within and opaque to those without.” He argued that it was precisely “the establishment of independent churches [that] opened new avenues for engaging with the dominant society, both politically and culturally,” and his study revealed that Frazier’s notion of “social and moral isolation in American society” simply did not match the evidence for engagement on a variety of fronts.<sup>55</sup>

Milton Sernett’s *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* presented ample evidence for real differences between black churches in the rural South and the urban North, showed the process by which rural migrants’ practices came to transform urban patterns, and argued that the “black church” model emerged in this time as an idealized conception of what the churches should be doing. Reformers sought to push churches away from internal affairs to external ones, to multifaceted “race” concerns, and this ideal had left an enduring legacy:

Many [scholarly] discussions of African American churches today assume that their normative mission is to serve the community by being agents of social change. Less interest is given to the internal life of the churches, that is, specifically to churches as arenas in which matters of ultimate meaning and concern are addressed. The Great Migration propelled this preoccupation with black churches as the means to ends other than those of offering members spiritual refreshment and a place to worship.<sup>56</sup>

Sernett’s historical work thus offers a provocative genealogy of the model of “the black church.” The collective evidence of these scholars demonstrates that the multifunctional “race” institution was, in the New South era, far more reformers’ ideal than actual reality. There were substantive class differences within black life, differences that were manifest in “bourgeois” and “folk” variants of Protestantism. And the idea of a unitary black religious mentality rests on both a minimizing of such class differences and an overstating of black cultural isolation. Indeed, the foundational works (Du Bois et al, Woodson, Mays and Nicholson, and Frazier) actually confirm many of these arguments. Du Bois and colleagues, Woodson (in his subsequent *The Rural Negro*), and Mays and Nicholson all found real differences between urban and rural religious forms. “While the outward appearances of the Negro rural church may seem like the urban,” Woodson argued in *The Rural Negro*, “the two are inherently different. The urban church has become a sort of uplift agency; the rural church has remained a mystic shrine.”<sup>57</sup> Mays and Nicholson likewise noted that “although the problems of life in the country and city are comparable in seriousness, the reaction of the rural church to them is quite different from that of the urban church. The rural church holds closely to the traditional and orthodox soul-centered programs.”<sup>58</sup> Frazier, though vital in establishing the idea of black churches as multi-functional race institutions, saw little of the activist or proto-activist spirit. “The Negro church could enjoy [its] freedom so long as it offered no threat to the white man’s dominance.” Free, but circumscribed, “the religion of the Negro continued to be other-worldly in its outlook, dismissing the privations and sufferings and injustices of this world as temporary and transient.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> James Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University, 1995), xi.

<sup>56</sup> Milton Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African-American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University, 1997), 4-5.

<sup>57</sup> Carter Woodson, *The Rural Negro* (Washington: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1930), 159-160.

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church*, 252.

<sup>59</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 51.

One need not wholly accept such critical, reformist judgments to appreciate their more complicated perspective. Their sense of internal class differences, their idealized conception, their tone of critique—these dropped out in the subsequent construction of “the black church” model. As with the scholarship on white Protestantism, it is worth asking if the post-60s work on black Protestantism was not too influenced by the Civil Rights movement: its notable solidarity across class lines and its activist churches. Perhaps there is a similar presentism at work, pushing back a model that fit the 60s into the New South era, thus obscuring distinctions and differences from that older era.

This transition—from New South to Sunbelt—is the invisible elephant in the room. The scholars who, in the wake of the Civil Rights protests of the 50s and 60s, were inspired to craft or solidify the twin models of a unitary white southern Protestantism on the side of power and a unified black church in activist resistance to power lived in the wake of another major transformation in regional life. This was a quieter, less dramatic transformation, without arresting events like those on the streets of 1963 Birmingham, but it decisively altered the region and voided an older dynamic of power. Especially in the years 1940-1960 (but beginning as early as the 1934 displacements of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and touching some local areas as late as the 1970s), the region metamorphosed from impoverished, predominantly agricultural New South to rising, prosperous, diversified Sunbelt.

In the 1880s and '90s, as the New South social order was taking shape, location of residence and/or location of occupation took on new meaning as a rough marker of class. The cities, but especially the legions of new towns, emerged as centers of regional wealth. Most of that wealth was produced in the countryside—staple crops like cotton and tobacco, minerals like coal and iron, lumber and other forest products like turpentine—but the profits flowed into and helped construct the towns and cities of the New South. “To be ‘country’,” Edward Ayers writes of new cultural categories associated with this economic imbalance, “was to be outside the currents of modern history, to be backward, ludicrous . . . [R]ural dwellers confronted confident, often arrogant, town and city dwellers.”<sup>60</sup> It was precisely such town and city dwellers who occupied positions of leadership in the principal denominations of the region: the Southern Baptist Convention; the National Baptist Convention; the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; and in smaller numbers, the African Methodist Episcopal Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Zion; the Colored Methodist Church; and the Presbyterian Church in the United States. Sources from such denominational leaders have been heavily used in historical reconstructions of religion—often without attention to the cultural and economic dynamics of power. What survives in their writings has been projected too easily across the regional population. By contrast, historians like Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham and Paul Harvey, who have been careful to note the class position of the denominational leadership, have found “bourgeois” distancing from and criticism of the “folk” as a recurrent theme. Harvey argues that “white and black Baptist denominationalists shared similar ideas of proper spiritual expression . . . especially in the desire for ‘efficiency’ and ‘rationality’ in worship ritual and denominational structure.” Such “advocates of bourgeois respectability” thus “found much fault with the backwardness of rural churches.”<sup>61</sup>

That “rural” and “urban,” or “folk” and “bourgeois,” marked substantive religious differences within the region is not a historian’s imposition. Indeed, regional church studies from the New South era—Victor Masters’ *The Country Church in the South* (1916), Edmund Brunner’s *Church Life in the Rural South* (1923), Charles Hamilton and John Ellison’s *The Negro Church in Rural Virginia* (1930), Jesse Ormond’s *The Country Church in North Carolina* (1931), Liston Pope’s *Millhands and Preachers: A Study of Gastonia* (1942), Harry Richardson’s *Dark Glory: A Picture of the Church among*

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<sup>60</sup> Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University, 1992), 187-213.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997), 78-79.

*Negroes of the Rural South* (1947) being among the more notable—repeatedly used categories of “rural” and “urban” (with Pope’s study adding a third category for mill workers). The bourgeois reformers, white or black, who wrote these studies looked at rural churches, white or black, with the critical spirit that Harvey and Higginbotham found. In rural black churches Tuskegee chaplain Harry Richardson saw “the weakness, the tragedy, of a great institution deserted by its leading minds.” They were a “neglected, backyard fragment of the Christian church.”<sup>62</sup> Duke Divinity School professor Jesse Ormond saw a gloomy rural scene: “enthusiasm in many of the country churches of North Carolina is gone, hope is waning, members are leaving, and the churches are dying.”<sup>63</sup> These religious evaluations parallel the more general cultural associations that Ayers described, associations that ordered life in the New South.

So why have not more historians seen them? Why do the monoliths of unified, homogenous white Protestantism and black church still endure? Scenes from the Civil Rights era were so compelling that the models seemed to fit quite easily. But there is another explanation, tied to the structural transformation in the region. By the time of the most intense years of Civil Rights activity, the New South order was vanishing. Beginning in the mid-1930s, rising in the 40s, and cresting in the 50s, the countryside was depleted of a sizable, dense, white/black population of small farmers, tenants, sharecroppers, coal miners, and timber workers. Mechanized, capital-intensive agriculture slowly replaced labor-intensive (human and animal) farming across the region, even as agriculture itself was dethroned from its long dominance of the regional economy. More capital in the region also led to the mechanization of coal mining and timber production (once the heavily-cut forests had recovered and/or forests grew up where fields had once been) and the further displacement of rural-based workers. “Year by year these machines grow from one odd and curious object to be gaped at to thousands that become so deadly in their impersonal labor that we grow to hate them,” Richard Wright wrote in 1941 in his folk history. “Black and white alike now go to the pea, celery, orange, grapefruit, cabbage, and lemon crops . . . Our dog-trot, dog-run, shotgun, and gingerbread shacks fill with ghosts and tumble down from rot.”<sup>64</sup> In the 50s, Jack Kirby notes, some three million rural people left not just the countryside but the region altogether.<sup>65</sup> The social base of distinctly “rural” religious forms—what occupied the attention of a generation of New South denominational reformers—was vanishing at mid-century, as was the once-common poverty in which rural whites and blacks had lived. Racist hiring discrimination was overt in the new manufacturing jobs of the region, with the vast majority going to whites. Thus, many once-rural whites saw their economic position improve relative to that of once-rural blacks. Finding fewer options than whites in the new Sunbelt, millions of blacks left the South in the years on either side of the Civil Rights movement: in 1940 just under 80% of the United States black population lived in the South; by 1970, 47% did.

Thus historians writing in the ‘60s and early ‘70s conceptualized power as white not just because of Civil Rights, but also because the Sunbelt transformation had erased the once-common rural poverty of millions of whites and blacks. In this they missed an element that had been so striking to observers of the New South. Gazing at Arkansas cotton pickers at work in 1935, New York journalist Frazier Hunt was moved to write, “In some strange way, they reminded me of Chinese coolies working in the soy beans along the Southern Manchurian Railroad. They seemed to belong to another land than the America I knew and loved.”<sup>66</sup> To those inside the region, such

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<sup>62</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory: A Picture of the Church among Negroes in the Rural South* (New York: Friendship Press, 1947), xiv.

<sup>63</sup> Jesse Ormond, *The Country Church in North Carolina* (Durham: Duke University, 1931), 341.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*, 79.

<sup>65</sup> Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 69.

<sup>66</sup> Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam’s Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1975), 91.

poverty would not have seemed foreign, but rather a familiar element in structuring the social order. Of "poor whites" (tenants and croppers) in Sunflower County, Mississippi, Leonard Doob found in the mid-30s that "as a class they are despised by almost every white person in the upper or middle class. The adjectives applied to them are the same used to refer to the Negro caste: shiftless, unreliable, dishonest, etc. . . . 'Rednecks' are considered stubborn; it is acknowledged that they resemble Negroes in every indecent, immoral respect; and then the complaint is voiced that they should also be obedient like 'the niggers.'"<sup>67</sup> When black and white tenants and croppers joined together in the mid-'30s in the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, challenging both landlord power and the displacements of the AAA, they met with intense violence and well-established ridicule. As landlords sought to crush the union through force, Arkansas governor Marion Futrell dismissed the union as the unthreatening work of "pore white trash and shiftless niggers."<sup>68</sup>

But if the economic lot of these denigrated groups had once been similar, had their religious sensibility? Had rural whites and blacks, in the shared powerlessness of poverty, forged a kind of "folk" religion that Wilson and Harvey have suggested? The Southern Rural Life Council, an interracial group of academics centered in the Nashville universities, thought so. In their 1946 report *The Church and Rural Community Living in the South* they wrote, "Economic and social stratification are reflected along denominational lines as well as within churches of the same denomination . . . We find two kinds of religions which draw their members from different social levels . . . The religion of the poor, of the outcast, and the oppressed tends to become an other-worldly escape from the difficulties of daily life, and the religion of the respectable, the well-to-do middle class, tends to become a benediction upon the status quo. One type of church does not disturb the satisfaction of its members, while the other type provides no understanding of the underlying causes of their situation."<sup>69</sup> One does not have to read too far between the lines here to see the "bourgeois" and "folk" (or "urban" and "rural") forms that historians like Higginbotham and Harvey have posited. This should put the lie to the idea of utter religious homogeneity on either side of the color line, suggesting instead the presence, in the New South era, of real religious commonalities along class lines.

But was "folk" religion simply the other-worldly escape that reformist academics thought it was, the weak and declining entity that Harry Richardson and Jesse Ormond said they saw? Should we assume this as its dominant spirit and function in crafting a model to open up this stratum of New South religion? In fact two historians have developed models for interpreting a layer of poor people's religion in the New South. Both David Edwin Harrell and Wayne Flynt were critical of the idea of a unified, homogenous white Protestantism as that idea was taking shape. In works from the '60s to the present, they have consistently argued that Protestantism took on a different shape in the churches of the poor. They have looked exclusively at the *white* poor, thus not dismantling the idea that regional religious life was essentially divided along the color line, but they have carved out space for the idea that power relations in the New South were not just white and black, that the powerlessness of poverty was a substantive experience for millions.

As early as 1971, Harrell criticized what was then emerging as "an oversimplified view of 'the southern church'" and argued that "the rich religious diversity of the section has been overlooked."<sup>70</sup> In a 1985 essay on "Religious Pluralism," he noted the "exploding historiography" of southern history, which was revealing significant internal class tensions and shaking up stock notions of a "solid South" and called for historians to "inject class tension into the study of

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<sup>67</sup> Leonard Doob, "Poor Whites: A Frustrated Class" in John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, 455.

<sup>68</sup> H.L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land* (Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979), 130.

<sup>69</sup> Southern Rural Life Council, *The Church and Rural Community Living in the South* (Nashville: Southern Rural Life Council, 1947), 21.

<sup>70</sup> David Harrell, *White Sects and Black Men in the Recent South* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1971), 7.

southern religion.”<sup>71</sup> Harrell’s own method of exploring diversity and class tension in the New South was through the category of “sect.” This category was developed by German church historian Ernst Troeltsch and later elaborated by church historian H. Richard Niebuhr. If a denomination—“church” in Troeltsch’s original typology—is an established, socially respectable group that (perhaps not always consciously) provides sanction for the dominant order, a sect is a newer, smaller movement of the relatively marginalized that may articulate a religious vision at odds with the social order. Looking for religious pluralism in the South, Harrell went to the smaller groups—the Churches of Christ, the Holiness and Pentecostal movements, the Cumberland Presbyterians, the Primitive Baptists, and the Landmark movement among Southern Baptists—and characterized them as sects in Troeltsch’s sense.



Members of the Primitive Baptist Church in Morehead, Kentucky, attending a creek baptizing by submersion. By Marion Post Wolcott, August 1940. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USF34-055314-D]

These smaller groups housed “religions of the dispossessed,” Harrell argued.<sup>72</sup> They emerged as conservative, even reactionary movements of marginalized people who felt left behind by the modernizing of the denominations. “In each case,” Harrell argued, “the conservative movements won wide support among the poor and farmers and retarded the growth of liberalism.”<sup>73</sup> The central “conservative” elements of the sectarian groups were exclusivity and otherworldliness, and the appeal of these to the “dispossessed” was clear. Exclusivity, or the fact that (in the words of a sociologist he quoted) “in the life style of the sectarian the religious group appears to be his most meaningful

association,” gave people on the margins a sense of identity, over and against the categories of the social order. And the central theological tenet, “a message combining rejection of this world and the centering of man’s hopes in the next,” codified frustrated longings. Believers found solace in the idea that “one day the last would be first.”<sup>74</sup> Their bleak hopelessness of the present found release in otherworldly fixations. Or, as Harrell put it critically, “these escapist and narcotic ideas made sense to destitute southerners.”<sup>75</sup> Or, turned around: “deprivation has always been the breeding ground for religious zealots.”<sup>76</sup>

Does this category of sect, and an assumed otherworldly orientation, fit the context of the New South? Should we look to newer, smaller groups to conceptualize the religious life of the poor? In the European context in which Troeltsch first formulated the concept, official state

<sup>71</sup> David Harrell, “Religious Pluralism: Catholics, Jews, Sectarians” in Charles Reagan Wilson, ed. *Religion in the South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1985), 63.

<sup>72</sup> Harrell, *White Sects and Black Men in the Recent South*, chapter 1 title.

<sup>73</sup> David Harrell, “The Evolution of Plain-Folk Religion in the South, 1835-1920” in Samuel Hill, ed. *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience*, 36.

<sup>74</sup> Harrell, “Evolution” in Hill, *Varieties*, 43.

<sup>75</sup> David Harrell, “The South: Seedbed of Sectarianism” in Harrell, ed. *Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism* (Macon: Mercer University, 1981), 54.

<sup>76</sup> Harrell, “The South” in Harrell, ed. *Varieties*, 50; for other applications of the sect model see also Harrell, “The Sectional Origins of the Churches of Christ” *Journal of Southern History* 30 (August 1964); Harrell, *The Churches of Christ in the Twentieth Century: Homer Hailey’s Personal Journey* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2000); Samuel Hill, *One Name But Several Faces: Variety in Popular Christian Denominations in Southern History* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1996).



churches legally defined all citizens as members. Thus difference was located in illegal, dissident groups, or in remote regions where the power of state, and state church, was weak. Did the denominations of the New South possess the level of cultural dominance that Europe's state churches once did? Scanning sources from denominational/bourgeois leaders, white or black, reveals recurrent laments that they were not managing to place their stamp on churches of the rural poor *within* their own denominations. Consider the Southern Baptist Convention's massive 1922 study of rural churches associated with the Convention. Using a rigid definition of "rural" (places with fewer than 1000 people, as opposed to the Census definition of places with fewer than 2500), the denominational bureaucracy analyzed some 22,000 rural churches, representing 68% of total SBC membership.<sup>77</sup> What they found disturbed them. Only 12.5% of rural churches sent delegates to state convention meetings, and only 6.3% sent delegates to the annual Convention meeting. 75.9% of rural ministers had no seminary training, 90% of rural church members had never seen a denominational periodical, and 73.6% of rural churches had never held a denominational rally.<sup>78</sup> Surveying the study for his own subsequent monograph on church reform, seminary professor J.W. Jent argued that rural churches needed "closer touch with denominational life." "The average country pastor"—usually working during the week in manual labor just like his congregants—was "utterly *inefficient*," Jent charged, and he called for reformers to rescue country churches, bringing them into line with denominational ideas and structures.<sup>79</sup>

No other denomination, white or black, undertook such a sweeping study, but more concentrated field studies by reformers (some noted above) consistently corroborate what the SBC found: that rural churches, though sharing a name with a regional or national denomination, had a local life of their own, with little to do with the denominational structure. The category of sect is therefore not just unhelpful but unnecessary: one need look simply at the local level for the possibility of religious difference. Furthermore, the implication that the sect involved a small group simply does not fit demographics in the New South. The ranks of the rural poor were far into the millions, easily a third of the total regional population.<sup>80</sup> If economically and culturally marginalized, they were hardly a fringe numerical minority. Nor were they primarily identified with newer, smaller religious groups: the SBC alone found 2,193,205 members in its rural churches in its 1922 study—far more than, say, the Primitive Baptists (60,426 rural members according to the 1926 US Census) or the Cumberland Presbyterians (45,997 rural members in 1926).<sup>81</sup>

Finally, Harrell's working premise that the newer, smaller groups were *a priori* "religions of the dispossessed" bears questioning. One of Harrell's dispossessed, Landmark Baptist and Little Rock minister Ben Bogard, spearheaded the effort to bring the 1928 Anti-Evolution bill to a popular referendum in Arkansas.<sup>82</sup> Such political clout was not enjoyed by the post-disfranchisement rural poor. Edward Ayers, looking closely at county-level data to see where the new Holiness-Pentecostal groups flourished, found that they "were not located in the backwaters...but in the very places that had experienced the greatest change over the preceding fifty years." They thrived insofar as they "inverted the cultural values being disseminated throughout the South by towns, railroads, and advertising."<sup>83</sup> They particularly focused on the new dilemma of consumption—one that would seem less-than-pressing for the "abjectly poor" whom

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<sup>77</sup> *Southern Baptist Convention Handbook 1923* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1923).

<sup>78</sup> J.W. Jent, *The Challenge of the Country Church* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1924), 151,155; *SBC Handbook*, 68.

<sup>79</sup> Jent, *Challenge*, 151,155.

<sup>80</sup> See the estimates of W.T. Couch, ed. *These Are Our Lives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1939), xiv-xix.

<sup>81</sup> United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Religious Bodies: 1926 Volumes 1 and 2* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1930). These statistics are not infallible, since, for example, numbers in the SBC's 1922 study do not match those of the 1926 Census, but they do give an idea of broad outlines in the region.

<sup>82</sup> David Harrell, "Evolution of Plain-Folk Religion" in Hill, ed. *Varieties*, 35; Kenneth Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century*, 85-86.

<sup>83</sup> Edward Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 407-408.

Harrell identified as the type attracted to Pentecostalism.<sup>84</sup> More work needs to be done on the class composition of these newer, smaller groups, but Beth Schweiger's criticism stands. Historians have too-readily invoked "denominational affiliation as shorthand for social class. . ." "yet," she argued in a 1998 forum, "the sources contradict this kind of analysis."<sup>85</sup>

What about Harrell's other argument, rooted in the idea of the sect: that the religion of the poor was, as the Southern Rural Life Council had suggested, otherworldly in orientation? Wayne Flynt has consistently claimed that instances of rural-based social protest—Populism, Socialism, labor unions in the coal mines and textile mills, and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union—challenged the otherworldly trope. "Presumably no more conservative American ever lived than the individualistic, rural, southern [white] Evangelical," he noted in a 1979 paper. "What always puzzled me about that assumption was that counties which were made up of precisely this kind of person staged the Populist revolt," he stated pointedly, and he went on to argue that rural protest was "not as rare as the scarcity of written records indicate."<sup>86</sup> Conducting his own oral history work and looking for sources beyond bourgeois denominationalists, Flynt recovered rural people and a context of "ferment" in which "important new ideas charged the atmosphere."<sup>87</sup> "Holiness people make good Socialists," one rural organizer in Oklahoma and Texas noted in the 1910s, and recurrently in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Flynt found examples of radical political ideas "at the forks of the creek, where the poorly educated 'jack leg' preacher reigned," in precisely the local rural churches that had minimal denominational association.<sup>88</sup> He noted that in the 1930s ministers from rural churches bypassed the regional political structure and appealed directly to President Roosevelt for aid in the crisis years of the Depression.<sup>89</sup> Such examples should, Flynt argued, counter the image of the "pie-in-the-sky evangelical."<sup>90</sup>

*But*, Flynt also consistently argued that this (sometimes radical) political activity was not the dominant tone in poor white religion. He conceded that transforming society was not the main impulse, that on the face of it poor white religion did look otherworldly. But he argued in his 2004 Southern Historical Association president's address that even this seeming otherworldliness had real meaning, a meaning that could be explained through the insights of modern psychology and anthropology, particularly the work of Robert Coles and Clifford Geertz. One should look at the functions that religion fulfilled in the lives of the poor, and there one would see that what rural churches gave to their members was a feeling of "self-worth . . . a sense of community, hope in a world of adversity, ultimate vindication in a world of powerlessness, emotional release in a world of drab routine." "Rather than escapist," Flynt argued, "such functions appear to many social scientists to be essential to personal hope, wholeness, and well-being."<sup>91</sup> This psychological-functional model was similar to the functional model of "the black church" as articulated by Mays, Nicholson, and Frazier: in a healthy society, most people fulfill such needs through the

<sup>84</sup> Harrell, "Evolution of Plain-Folk Religion" in Hill, ed. *Varieties*, 39.

<sup>85</sup> Donald Mathews, Samuel Hill, Beth Schweiger, John Boles, "Forum: Southern Religion" *Religion and American Culture* 8 (Summer 1998), 164.

<sup>86</sup> Wayne Flynt, "One in the Spirit, Many in the Flesh: Southern Evangelicals" in Harrell, ed. *Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism*, 35,43.

<sup>87</sup> Wayne Flynt, "Southern Protestantism and Reform 1890-1920" in Hill, ed. *Varieties*, 147.

<sup>88</sup> Flynt, "Southern Protestantism" in Hill, ed. *Varieties*, 138; Wayne Flynt, "Southern Baptists: Rural to Urban Transition" *Baptist History and Heritage* (January 1981), 26; see also Wayne Flynt, *Alabama Baptists: Southern Baptists in the Heart of Dixie* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1998) for a discussion of a state where Populism was particularly strong.

<sup>89</sup> Wayne Flynt, "Religion for the Blues: Evangelicalism, Poor Whites, and the Great Depression" *Journal of Southern History* 71 (February 2005).

<sup>90</sup> Flynt, "Southern Protestantism" in Hill, ed. *Varieties*, 147.

<sup>91</sup> Flynt, "Religion for the Blues" *Journal of Southern History* 7; See also Flynt, "One in the Spirit" in Harrell, ed. *Varieties*, 32-33.

everyday workings of the social order. Black churches, Mays, Nicholson, and Frazier had asserted, gave a subordinated race these basic needs, and Flynt adapted the model to explain the meaning of churches for impoverished whites marginalized by the larger society. In the mid-30s, Flynt summarized, many poor whites “inhabited a [mental] world that shunned politics, rejected the secular world, and awaited transportation to a heavenly kingdom beyond the troubles of the world. But . . . even that religion is comprehensible as a way of making bearable the abuse, defeat, and powerlessness of a life full of pain.”<sup>92</sup>

Especially in November 2004, when Flynt delivered his address and when many academics were concerned about the apparent force of evangelicals in the recent election, it was important to remind even historians of the South that only a few generations ago, a large class of southerners had lived in severe poverty and a world of minimal options. Hardly the aggressive “Religious Right” based in a southern “Jesusland” (as one post-election cartoon had it), rural white southerners of an earlier era practiced a religion that was either apolitical but psychologically meaningful, or political with a leftist and even radical bent.

But there are a couple of issues that linger. First, if New South poverty was formative to religious life and sensibility, why limit analysis to poor whites? Why not look for commonalities along class lines and across the color line? Second, does the psychological-functionalist model adequately capture the dynamics of poor white religion, anymore than the multi-functional race institution model appropriately described black churches? If poor people’s religion was a device to get them through the day, a working compensation for the psychological needs that went unfulfilled in the daily patterns of society, why would it possess any attraction for outsiders, like the folk revivalists who shuddered at “Oh Death,” or the British filmmakers who hit the southern backroads in search of “the wrong-eyed Jesus”? If it was essentially a “religion for the blues” that the poor experienced, wouldn’t it have served its purpose only so long as certain marginalized people experienced such blues—wouldn’t it have been strictly a religion of the socially unfulfilled, irrelevant to the comfortable and secure?

Here it is critical to go back to the spirit of the folk revivalists: their working sense that the elderly, rural poor of the New South had something to say to them, something they weren’t hearing in the booming national “consumer’s republic” of the postwar era. Music critic Greil Marcus calls this older folk sensibility—of which religion was an intrinsic part—“old, weird America.”<sup>93</sup> Samuel Charters, one of the early folk revivalists, recalled his feelings when, in 1948 in his Berkeley apartment, he first listened to old 78s of the songs of Blind Willie Johnson. Johnson was a black central Texas preacher and songster, who adapted older folk songs and composed his own, such as “John the Revelator,” “Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed,” and “God Moves on the Water.” As a side project, as it was for Dock Boggs in the same years, Johnson recorded thirty songs for Columbia in the late 20s. “What we heard on those records,” Charters recalled, “was so different from anything else that we knew about that it didn’t even seem to come from any world we could recognize . . . I still can never listen to the raw, expressive plaint of ‘Dark Was the Night . . .’ without feeling the hair rise on the back of my neck.”<sup>94</sup>

How do we get back into that older world, its weirdness, its compelling attraction to various outsiders over time? Two figures might serve as guides: Flannery O’Connor and Robert Coles. O’Connor and Coles are by no means the only observers who have written about a regional stratum of folk religion practiced by the poor. There’s a fair amount from folklorists, from Alan Lomax’s *The Rainbow Sign: A Southern Documentary* (1959) to Robert Hall and Carol Stack’s collection *Holding on to the Land and the Lord* (1982) to Ruel Tyson, James Peacock, and Daniel Patterson’s collection *Diversities of Gifts* (1988). There are the more intensified studies of Bruce Rosenberg (*Can*

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<sup>92</sup> Flynt, “Religion for the Blues,” 38.

<sup>93</sup> Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic*, 87.

<sup>94</sup> Samuel Charters, liner notes to *The Complete Blind Willie Johnson* (Columbia/Legacy, 1993), 8.

*These Bones Live?*) and Jeff Todd Titon (*Powerhouse for God*). Read critically, the field studies by denominational reformers can be useful, as can the studies of New South rural life like John Dollard's *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, Charles Johnson's *Shadow of the Plantation*, and Morton Rubin's *Plantation County*. But O'Connor and Coles stand out because they are both well-known and their writings are easily accessible; they are explicit in locating the "folk" in a very definite time and place; O'Connor, but especially Coles, showed that the folk religion of the New South crossed the color line but not the class line; and both demonstrated that folk religion contained considerable intellectual depth and theological creativity.

Flannery O'Connor's rich fiction (published from 1952 to 1964) has attracted a massive body of scholarship. Charles Wilson has referenced her periodically for depicting a different side of religion in the South, and to date three *JSR* articles have interpreted her work. For my purposes, O'Connor is notable because though she grew up in the New South era and wrote in its twilight in the very years that Jim Crow was dismantled, race relations were not the driving concern of her fiction. Alice Walker, who grew up sharecropping in the 40s and 50s not far from O'Connor's home outside Milledgeville, Georgia, lauded this rather strange omission. Of a college course in Southern writers, Walker recalled, "the other writers we studied—Faulkner, McCullers, Welty—seemed obsessed with a racial past that would not let them go. They seemed to beg the question of their character's humanity on every page." By contrast, "O'Connor's characters" with their messy humanity, "shocked and delighted me."<sup>95</sup> Such characters as Francis Marion Tarwater, Hulga Hopewell, O.E. Parker, and Tom T. Shiftlet depicted, in exaggerated form and often in violent crises, a messy, troubled longing for God. They carried "an invisible burden," O'Connor stated on the college lecture circuit, because they were "Christ-haunted. The Southerner who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God."<sup>96</sup> There was more in regional religion, O'Connor's fiction repeatedly portrayed, than a sanctifier of white supremacy (what Samuel Hill called "Southernness, the 'God above God'"), a default space for "race" activism, or a coping mechanism for the poor.<sup>97</sup> The cultural power of religion gave it a strange life of its own, such that even those who sought adamantly to escape it could not wholly. "Ghosts can be fierce and instructive," O'Connor argued. "They cast strange shadows."<sup>98</sup>

While O'Connor thought this religious hauntedness touched all classes in the region, the majority of her characters were impoverished rural people, precisely that sizable class that has been notably in the shadows of the historiography. "Tell that girl to quit writing about poor folks," a local man told O'Connor's uncle shortly after the publication of her first novel in 1952. "I see poor folks every day and I get mighty tired of them, and when I read, I don't want to see any more of



"White sharecropper family, formerly mill workers in the Gastonia textile mills. When the mills closed down seven years ago, they came to this farm near Hartwell, Georgia," July 1937. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USF34-018147-C].

<sup>95</sup> Alice Walker, "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor" *Ms.* (December 1975), in Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004), 51-52.

<sup>96</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" (1960 lecture at Wesleyan College) in Sally Fitzgerald, ed. *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 818.

<sup>97</sup> Samuel Hill, "The South's Two Cultures" in Hill et al., *Religion and the Solid South*, 50.

<sup>98</sup> O'Connor, "Some Aspects" in *Collected Works*, 818.

them."<sup>99</sup> O'Connor didn't heed this man's admonition, because as she explained in her lectures, though a Catholic of propertied background, she felt a much deeper kinship with "backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than . . . with those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development."<sup>100</sup> In a letter she described herself as a "hillbilly Thomist," kindred spirit to the rural poor despite different religious tradition, social status, and formal education.<sup>101</sup>

In the context of the South, this was more than just an accidental feeling, more than utility for the sake of art. O'Connor belonged to the New South bourgeoisie—born in Savannah in 1925, she grew up there in a house on one of the old squares, and (after a 1938 family move) in Milledgeville, in an imposing house on the same city block as the antebellum, Greek Revival governor's mansion. After several years outside the region, she returned in 1951 to stay. Her congenital lupus had become manifest, and she came home to live with her mother, recently moved to the hundred-acre-plus family farm, Andalusia, four miles out from town. From Andalusia—a cotton farm-turned-dairy operation, with tenant and wage labor—O'Connor observed the regional scene with an keen eye. She was well aware of the bourgeois Protestant religion of respectability, and she satirized respectable types like the Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and Ruby Turpin in "Revelation." But the majority of her characters were from the ranks of the rural poor. As her prose lecture comments explained, it was in this class that O'Connor saw a different kind of regional religion—one that was not captured by the monoliths of white Protestantism and the black church.

An implicit argument in all of O'Connor's fiction is that one need not have formal education to have a richly complicated inner life that did wrestle with definite theological beliefs. "When the poor hold sacred history in common," she argued in a 1963 talk, "they have concrete ties to the universal and the holy which allow the meaning of their every action to be heightened and seen under the aspect of eternity."<sup>102</sup> Thus the narrative of the Bible—often the lone book in the shacks and cabins of the rural poor—cast an aura over everyday life in complicated ways. In mundane scenes like the unveiling of a new tattoo, a barn loft picnic, or feeding the hogs, or in crisis moments like a bull's bloody goring, a tractor brake slipping, or a river baptism, O'Connor's stories portrayed the poor coming to terms with ideas embedded in the "sacred history" of their Bibles.

What were these ideas? This is not the place for a full catalogue or investigation, since the concern is simply to sketch a viable model for opening up a stratum of New South folk religion, but O'Connor's stories and other works do suggest some dominating themes. As she phrased them tersely in a 1963 lecture, they were "a distrust of the abstract, a sense of human dependence on the grace of God, and a knowledge that evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured."<sup>103</sup> These themes match rather seamlessly what many folklorists found in their work with elderly people from the older rural New South: that the mode of religious expression was a narrative, poetic one, shunning prose and its abstractions, conveying meaning in story and song; that there was a pervasive sense of human limit and finitude, or what Charles Wilson called a "memento mori tradition"; that a powerful feeling of personified evil—what folklorist Bruce

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<sup>99</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The Teaching of Literature" in Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, eds., *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 131.

<sup>100</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South" in *Collected Works*, 859.

<sup>101</sup> Flannery O'Connor letter, 5/18/55, in *Collected Works*, 934.

<sup>102</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South" in *Collected Works*, 858.

<sup>103</sup> O'Connor, "Catholic Novelist" *Collected Works*, 862.

Grindal called Satan as a “brute force of fragmentary purpose”—was far more the basis of struggle than a morality of self-control fixated on idle pleasures like drinking and dancing.<sup>104</sup>

But there’s evidence closer to O’Connor’s time that shows that her fictional types were imagined from real people in the late New South: Robert Coles’ remarkable late 50s-early 60s fieldwork with the rural poor. Coles knew O’Connor for a short time in 63-64, he working out of the SNCC office in Atlanta, she in the hospital there suffering through the last stages of lupus. They met through the introduction of a nurse, Ruth Ann Jackson, who was the daughter of black sharecroppers, a lay preacher, and grandmother to one of the children who first integrated Atlanta’s schools. Jackson felt a kinship to O’Connor because, she said, she knew from talking to her that she believed in God, and she sought to have O’Connor’s stories put on the traveling hospital bookshelf. This religiously-based sense of kinship became emblematic for Coles, and as he pursued psychological research on children’s responses to desegregation, and later research on the rural poor, he came to see that the people he was studying and the people O’Connor was writing about populated the same world. A certain class of people and their religious longings were not incidental backdrops for O’Connor’s fiction, Coles noted, but rather evocations based on something real and historically specific: a world of rural poverty and, as a white farm wage laborer told Coles, “hard, hard religion.”<sup>105</sup> O’Connor’s work was art, not just sociology, but that art was a social document of specific people with a distinct sensibility in a concrete time and place.

Coles’ fieldwork made explicit something that O’Connor had left implicit: that rural whites and blacks shared a religious sensibility shaped by the experience of poverty. O’Connor did not, Coles pointed out in a 1979 lecture, ever write about black people as her *main* characters. But through O’Connor’s theological portrait of the South and its rural poor, Coles moved past the divisions of the color line to see commonalities in the religious mentality of “the poor”—black and white.

He was first concerned with the psychological effects of the color line, as exemplified in the Civil Rights challenge to it, and he published his research in the acclaimed 1967 *Children in Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear*. With O’Connor’s insights in mind, however, he turned from this study—one that basically confirms the historiography’s central racial division in religion—to one of a different tone, in which class commonalities and the experience of severe poverty were the central concerns. Published in 1971, *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers* united blacks and whites in a common experience of rural poverty and a religion with themes shaped by that experience. Coles intently listened to people who “can’t help going from ‘race relations’ and sociology to theology.”<sup>106</sup> If “unlettered,” they were hardly untheological. “We’re all in prison, all the time: we’re sinners—here by the grace of God . . . when we die, we either stay in prison, or we’re sprung. No one knows who goes where; only God does. You can’t get to him by telling him you’re Mr. Big, and you have more money than anyone can count in the Citizens and Southern Bank,” a white male farm worker told Coles.<sup>107</sup> “A lot of time I’ll be thinking there’s no point in going on,” a black female sharecropper confessed. “I think we’re born to be tested, and we’re always being tested around here, that’s for sure. In the same way Jesus was being tested all the time. They’d ask Him this and they’d ask Him that, and a lot of people just didn’t believe Him, and they didn’t like Him and they got Him after a while, they killed Him, and it was terrible.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “Digging Up Bones: Death in Country Music” in Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie*, 97; Bruce Grindal, “The Religious Interpretation of Experience in a Rural Black Community” in Robert Hall and Carol Stack, eds., *Holding on to the Land and the Lord: Kinship, Ritual, Land Tenure, and Social Policy in the Rural South* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1982), 97.

<sup>105</sup> Robert Coles, *Flannery O’Connor’s South* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1980), 61.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Coles, *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 594.

In 1979 Coles described the connections between his extensive field research and O'Connor's artistic vision. He knew that the rural South had changed drastically in the intervening two decades, and indeed that changes were already evident at the time of his original field research. (A subsequent study pursued the southern rural diaspora in *The South Goes North*). O'Connor's world was vanishing even as she wrote, as rural people left the southern countryside and the once-marginal, regional economy metamorphosed into the booming Sunbelt. But O'Connor had evoked something real and specific, Coles insisted, and he had witnessed it in the years that it was fading: "I have spent years in the homes of the people who are, in certain respects, [O'Connor's] chosen ones—the South's impoverished, hard-praying, stubbornly enduring rural folk, of both races."<sup>109</sup>

Though a psychiatrist by training, Coles was careful not to reduce religion to what O'Connor had called "a department of sociology or culture or personality development." In his



"Negro preacher and his wife live in this converted schoolhouse with two grandchildren. The rest of their children have all left the county. Heard County, Georgia," April 1941. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USF34-043917-D].

sensitive, nuanced concluding chapter to *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers*—also published as an essay titled "God and the Rural Poor"—Coles explored the profound psychological power of the religion of the poor, but he continually spoke in dialogue to the reader about the temptation to reduce it to something that could be thoroughly analyzed—and thereby co-opted—through the imaginatively imperialistic world of mid-twentieth century psychology.<sup>110</sup> Even the sympathetic observer risked "a kind of sympathy that stubbornly and even arrogantly dwells upon exteriors," on how the poor lack this and that and so compensate for it in their religion.<sup>111</sup> But the rural poor told him of their substantive inner lives, and they did so through the use of precise religious images

and stories. To say that what they were "really" talking about—as Coles was careful not to do—were human phenomena to which all of us can relate is to deny the possibility that they might have their own vision not fully consonant with a dominant academic sensibility. Reducing a theological vision to a psychological one couched in incidental religious garb was, Coles demonstrated precisely by not doing so, an imaginative imposition—and presentist to boot.

In the coal country of eastern Kentucky around 1960, Coles sat at table with an older examiner, a man who had been badly injured on the job and struggled now to live off his small farm. Over cornbread, pork, and coffee, Coles tried to make small talk about the preacher's nice new car. The man upbraided Coles and launched into a long jeremiad. He talked about injustice in the mines, the well-paid company-provided minister, and of his father:

I'll wonder a lot about God, and if He meant for us to get near Him by going to church and listening to ministers . . . the truth is that the mine owners are sinners, every one of

<sup>109</sup> Coles, *Flannery O'Connor's South*, xxx.

<sup>110</sup> Obviously, Flynt previously lauded Coles' work, and from it, he derived his model of psychological functionality. I agree with Flynt's praise of Coles, and I am grateful for Flynt's broader, career-long concern to write sympathetically of the white poor of the New South, but I think that his model of functionality (and his reading of Coles) concedes too much to the dominant academic sensibility, one that finds it difficult to make sense of religion and religious longings as ends in their own right, not just means to other (more palatable and comprehensible) ends.

<sup>111</sup> Coles, *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers*, 617.

them, for the way they treat us and sit back and let us get killed in those mines—while they take in the fat profits and send them up to Pittsburgh and New York and wherever the money goes, everywhere but here in Kentucky . . . My father believed in God. He knew how to read the Bible; that's all he knew how to read or ever did read. He could recite passages by heart. He'd do that in one breath, and then he'd tell us that a lot of ministers are holding the hands of the mine owners and getting paid to do nothing much except tell us to be quiet and law-abiding. My father said that even so we should go to church, and the church belongs to God, and He'll have His bad ministers, like there are bad in every type of person. He was betrayed by one of His disciples, way back there, and it still happens. . . .<sup>112</sup>

These are very culturally specific ideas, and it seems theft to me—cultural theft—to say that what this man really was talking about were the power relations of coal mining life. These elements are there, but they are articulated through a unique sensibility—a Protestantism of the poor—that cannot be reduced to just a psychological compensation or a protopolitical preparation. Plainly, that religious ethos was generated in and spoke to poverty, but it also involved creative engagement with an inherited religious tradition to craft a distinct vision of life. Opening up that vision—one that crossed the color line, was rooted in rural poverty and local churches, and contained a complicated grappling with everyday forces in modern life—will shed new, and perhaps unusual, light on the New South. The art of O'Connor and the fieldwork of Coles offer compelling ways to think outside established categories and get into this “old, weird” imaginative world.

Recovering that older world and its vision of life may or may not inspire scholars. A moral concern for just and equitable race relations—the concern that has driven so much of the historiography in the past forty years—may seem far more compelling as a beginning point for studying the religious past of the South. But, as long as the monoliths of white southern religion and the black church dominate the scholarly imagination, the theologically-complicated, rural-based folk religion of poor blacks *and* poor whites will remain in the shadows. Outsiders feeling their own modern or postmodern blues, some searching the southern backroads for clues, some listening to scratchy old recordings from 1927, will continue to get little help from historians. And, as the Sunbelt era fades into a global scene, where once-rising regional wage rates have stalled, where an expanding service economy is creating a new poor class, the complex interrelations of poverty and religion may seem baffling without well-tested tools to make sense of them.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 599-603.