

# **Christianity and Race in the American South**

A History

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## INTRODUCTION

# The Transcendental Blues of Southern Religion

In the darkest hour of the longest night  
If it was in my power I'd step into the light  
Candles on the altar, penny in your shoe  
Walk upon the water—transcendental blues

—Steve Earle, “Transcendental Blues” (2000)

This book begins and ends with water, tragedy, and survival. It opens at Saint Augustine, on Florida's Atlantic coast, and at the swampy mire of Jamestown, Virginia. Competition between European powers and England spurred these settlements. Early Virginians planted a colony in a micro-environment that virtually guaranteed death for the great majority in a land that eventually became the American South. These colonists set a pattern, too, for the combustible mix of conventional piety and unconventional avarice that powered much of southern history from the seventeenth century forward. From Jamestown grew the wealthy and powerful slave society that would lead a nation into its bloodiest war.

Four hundred years later, in August 2005, floodwaters nearly destroyed the city of New Orleans. The deluge was long foretold by those who knew anything about the city's inadequately constructed system of levees and water diversion canals. Largely man-made forces (interacting with environmental conditions and economic realities) had created a region that could produce incredible wealth and an intellectual and cultural life that defined a nation's sensibility. But the disaster following Hurricane Katrina revealed a level of racial and social inequality that belied the myths upon which that culture rested. Ten years later, the public response to the murders of nine African American worshipers in Charleston's historic Emanuel

African Methodist Episcopal Church in June 2015 suggested the regional transformations of race and religion that had occurred from the 1950s to the present.

Determination, resistance, survival, and sometimes even transcendence shape the story of race and southern Christianities, as narrated in this book. Yet from the eighteenth century forward in particular, a broadly shared set of southern Christianities could not escape the deep social hierarchies that defined—and often warped—people’s lives, their hopes, expectations, and daily realities. Rather, southerners justified, fought against, and transformed those social hierarchies through religious idioms. They were divided by shared faiths that fundamentally shaped how they saw the world and whether they believed they could change that world. Their world in turn shaped a blues sensibility of struggle, despair, and pain but also produced a transcendental religious culture that transformed the region and fundamentally influenced American ways of spiritual expression.

*Christianity and Race in the American South: A History* is a narrative history of race and southern Christianities from the late sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries. It draws from a wide variety of sources, including archaeological evidence, demographic analyses, theological expositions, church records, memoirs and literary works, oral histories, newspapers and other periodicals, diaries and letters, musical lyrics, and other kinds of documentation. The book surveys the multitude of ways southerners have recorded their religious arguments, ideas, visions, dreams, practices, and expressions.

Engaging in a deliberately selective narrative, *Christianity and Race in the American South* proposes its own periodization of southern religious history over the last four centuries, one that encompasses southern stories from early Virginia to the present. The book integrates the early South into the story of regional religious history. In doing so, this work suggests ways to understand the evolution of the region’s historical religious identities. It does so through tracking how “the South” and its religious traditions changed over time, how a particular form of regional religious identity became the normative narrative of that South, and then how that narrative transformed through the idioms of the very religious traditions that had created it. The region’s history placed diverse peoples in rigidly defined and often brutally maintained hierarchies and then asked them to search for the transcendental together. Thus, southern religion has been a world of the transcendental blues.

Race and southern Christianities shaped, and were shaped by, a constantly evolving regional identity. Contrary to popular views, “the South”

has never been parochial; it always has been a part of a much larger world. At times, particularly during the nineteenth century, it exercised disproportionate political and economic power in the United States. Therefore, "southern identity" cannot be restricted to the era when "Jesus was our Savior and cotton was our king," as the country songwriter Billy Joe Shaver put it.<sup>1</sup> Rather, this book suggests when, how, and why "the South" became a region as defined by its religious practices. It then examines key moments of transformations when the interaction of race and southern Christianities with political and economic developments created new cultural worlds. It concludes by sketching the ongoing story of a regional religious identity within a global South that, in its growing pluralism, harkens back to the early South.

This book focuses as well on the *paradoxes* of southern religious history from Jamestown to the present. One example is how the region has played a central role in fashioning a globalized world economy (including a circulation of people, as well as goods) while maintaining a tribal provincialism marked by hostility to outside ideas and agitators. A shared faith arose within a society of stark class and racial divisions. A regional culture arose that looked inward even as it exercised an immense global impact. A religious culture defined by its Biblicism and piety sacralized astonishing levels of human cruelty. That same society nurtured human artistic creativity that burst through religious shibboleths. In few other places did such a diverse mixture of religious ideas and expressions result in a dominant establishment at once so productive of extraordinary cruelty and generative of explosively artistic forms. The Solid South was internally riven. In those cracks arose spiritually charged expressions that came to define American culture.

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Since Donald Mathews's 1977 classic *Religion in the Old South*, studies of Christianity in the South have gone in two basic directions. Both are incorporated into this book. An older scholarship focused on the "cultural captivity" of whites, seeking explanations for the often-violent resistance to the civil rights movement. More recently, historians have included black voices in shaping the narrative. Thus, in *Religion in the Old South* white theologians and evangelical believers are the major actors; other historical subjects surround them but are acted upon rather than acting themselves. More recent scholarship has integrated the voices of whites and blacks, masters and slaves, and the powerful together with the relatively powerless. The result has been new social histories that connect religious belief, so-

cial structure, and individual behavior. *Christianity and Race in the American South* extends that approach into the entire sweep of the religious history of the South, including into the preevangelical era. The longevity of this narrative provides new perspectives on conceptions of “southern religion.”<sup>2</sup>

Diverse other southern stories also shaped the narrative of southern religious history. These range from the Powhatan Confederacy in early Virginia to Moravians in North Carolina, Cherokees and Creeks in the early national Southeast, Spiritualists seeking insights from mediums in New Orleans and elsewhere, and Catholics throughout the region. From early Virginia and Maryland to colonial Florida to antebellum Georgia, the South was, like much of early America, an ethnically and religiously motley region. Religious interactions among peoples from Europe, Africa, and the Americas especially defined the early South. A narrative overdetermined by evangelical dominance misses the fluidity of and the disjunctures contained within this story. The South originated as a polyglot region, changed with surprising swiftness into a religious region dominated by white and black evangelical Protestants, and more recently has begun to return to its origins as a multireligious and multiracial zone.

Thus, this book historicizes the term “southern religion” by placing evangelicalism within its proper historical context. Examining this longer duration of the region’s religious history foregrounds, for example, periods in which Native religious practices, French and Spanish Catholicism, and African/Islamic influences were central rather than peripheral. Evangelicalism was a religious upstart in the eighteenth-century South. It was a rising movement by the time of the Revolution and then a culturally central presence (albeit with many challengers) in the antebellum era. Appearing culturally dominant from the Civil War era to the mid-twentieth century, it now exists as an important tradition within a region that still statistically has something of an “evangelical belt” but is rapidly diversifying.<sup>3</sup>

Religion in the American South emerged as part of a globalized, transnational movement of peoples from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Prior to about 1820, African slaves constituted the single largest group of migrants arriving on American shores. Enslaved people employed a variety of strategies and developed new forms of religious expression in acculturating to their lives on the new continent. At the same time, they were at the very bottom of an international globalized economic order that empowered some of the greatest wealth-producing machines—sugar and cotton plantations, for example—that had ever existed in human history. Enslaved people experienced social deaths and entered a world where they were without history and without honor. But over the course

of the evangelical revolution, Africans contributed religion expressed as bodily movement, communal rituals, and emplaced interactions with the natural world. Peoples of African descent thus exerted an immense influence even over those who believed them to be lacking in honor.

Early modern English and European settlers in North America shared a "world of wonder" and a sense of embodied practices with Africans who were ostensibly "heathen" while they were "Christian." This became clearer as evangelical Awakenings reached the South in the later eighteenth century. In this religious movement, Scots Irish communal rituals of immanent transcendence merged with African notions and practices of bodily expression. In a sense, Africans helped teach an entire culture a different way of experiencing religion in and through the body. Consequently, religious seekers adopted, if unconsciously and insensibly, ways of enacting relationships with transcendent beings. These actions synthesized learned motor behaviors from vastly disparate parts of the world to invoke ritually powerful emotions. Even in a Protestant-dominated region as the American South became, religious expression has been embedded, embodied, and environmentally patterned. This is true whether we are talking about scattered Anglican churches in eighteenth-century Virginia, African American praise houses in the nineteenth century, or suburban megachurches in contemporary Tennessee.

Much of the scholarship in American religious history is bound by belief and doctrine. Religious studies scholars have usefully critiqued the Protestant bias in the historical study of religion. But here is the paradox: in American religious history it is difficult to conceive of a place other than the American South where religious expression is more about embodiment and emplacement. Part of the story of religion as "more than belief" in the American South is the struggle to contain religious experience within right belief. And it is a history centrally featuring the constant pushing of religious experience beyond those boundaries, into embodiment and *through* embodiment, into the larger channels of American culture.<sup>4</sup> This is the history that produced the transcendental blues of southern religion.

*Christianity and Race in the American South* takes short snapshots of the world of southerners who worshiped lustily at camp meetings even as they bought and sold slaves at the market; who invented much of American popular culture even as their dominant religious institutions were among the most vociferous critics of that popular culture, precisely because it was so bodily expressive; whose practices involved bodily movements in particular embedded spaces obscured or hidden from dominant powers; and whose poorer residents, white and black, gave voice to apocalyptic visions

far removed from the gospel of progress. In the twentieth century, if southern churches slumbered in “cultural captivity,” southern culture held the nation captive. People responded to the elemental force of its blues, country, and gospel music, its evocation of the most fundamental emotions of human life, and its literary grapplings with the most profound questions of race and American history. These literary, poetic, and musical productions drew from many sources, of course, but always were embedded in both a blues sensibility and a biblical history and lore.<sup>5</sup>

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Terms such as “community” have long defined southern culture. And in a recent survey of what (if any) generalizations still hold true for “the South,” journalist and author Tracy Thompson concludes that a particular tribalized form of community and an emotional religiosity still characterize regional culture. Thompson writes that the “box” of southern identity has two “constants,” the “two great institutions that have defined the limits of the available contents: evangelical religion and slavery.” And yet, the part of the box of southern identity represented by those two is shrinking. While the past is never dead, sometimes it does seem “past,” or amenable to change. If the South won’t be defined by the Confederacy, then what will define the region? The “most important” element, Thompson suggests, is “a sense of community forged under the conditions that obtained in the South.” Despite the suburbanization of the South, the region still “bears the imprint of that deep sense of community and an almost tribal definition of kin.”<sup>6</sup>

That may be the case. Yet from Jamestown to the present, wrenching, sweeping, community-altering change is a central theme of southern history. And religion has acted as a vital agent of those transformations. From a global seventeenth century subregion of the Caribbean world, to the massive internal migrations that formed “the South” of the antebellum era, to the “fundamental and astounding” upheavals (to use Abraham Lincoln’s words) wrought by the Civil War and Reconstruction, to the civil rights struggle and cultural explosions of the twentieth century, to the ongoing experiment in increased pluralism and prosperity balanced alongside certain ways of life and religious practices still disproportionately represented in the region, southern cultural history always has been intertwined with the formation and re-formation of religious identities. This book narrates and interprets key selected moments of that history. In doing so, I hope it deepens an understanding of the constructions and transformations of race and Christianities in the American South.