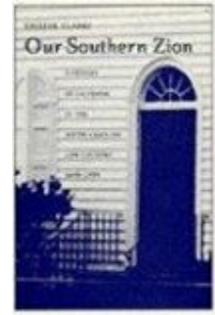


H-Net Reviews

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Erskine Clarke. *Our Southern Zion: A History of Calvinism in the South Carolina Low Country, 1690-1990*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996. xi + 429 pp. \$47.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-0757-8.

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Puritans in the Heart of Dixie

In this fine, albeit somewhat uneven, history of the reformed churches in the South Carolina low country, Erskine Clarke shows that Calvinism in the heart of the Old South was not a marginal religious tradition, but one that from the early colonial period commanded the allegiance of a significant number of whites and, from the time of the Great Awakening, a comparable number of blacks, both free and slave. It also, he argues, has been a major force in shaping the ethos and culture of the region, particularly in terms of its attitude towards the economy and intellectual life. Carolina Calvinists were particularly prominent in the slave trade that transformed the colony in the early eighteenth century. Three members of the Independent Meeting House alone imported 42 percent of all slave cargoes into Charleston during the peak period of 1735-40.

By the time of the Revolution, Calvinists made up nearly a third of the white population and had nearly as many churches and chapels in the area as the officially established Anglicans. The clergy was largely an imported one, from New England and Scotland. In the events that led to revolution and independence, dissenters played a disproportionate role in the colony. At the Independent Meeting House "gathered a circle of intellectuals" including David Ramsey and William Tennent, "that was perhaps the most important in the city during the years immediately before the Revolution" (p. 57). The dissenting tradition, Clarke points out, had clear ties to the republicanism that forged revolution. "Those in the Reformed community," he writes, "were convinced that

Anglicanism, centralized monarchical power, corruption, and tyranny marched together. An ideological and historical link existed, they believed, between religious and political authoritarianism" (p. 47). The Great Awakening, in which Carolina Calvinists had fully participated, had helped lay the ground for rebellion, as one South Carolina loyalist, the conservative Calvinist Alexander Hewat, clearly saw. The New Lights, he remarked, had "discovered an aversion to our [British] constitution both of church and state" (p. 84).

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the South Carolina low country had become the bastion of Presbyterianism in the South. By 1860, there were five Congregational and Presbyterian churches in one mile stretch of Charleston. Much of this church membership, Clarke notes, was black, especially outside of Charleston. A great deal of the increase in African American Presbyterians occurred during the antebellum period, apparently a result of the Second Great Awakening, about which, unlike his treatment of the first, Clarke is virtually silent. One of the members of the Second Presbyterian Church, the free black Denmark Vesey, led an abortive uprising of slaves in 1822 that had severe repercussions for both church and community. An immediate consequence of Vesey's rebellion was the banning of any independent churches for black Christians. Ironically, this gradually led to the establishment of a "church within a church" in which blacks developed leadership and developed a utopian vision that challenged the dominant white one. In Charleston, where black Reformed members, a mix of

free and bonded African Americans, constituted a minority of the congregations, the whites themselves provided a separate organization for blacks, with white supervision. In the countryside, where blacks vastly outnumbered the whites in the churches as well as in the general population, they had less freedom. Perhaps not surprisingly, most rural blacks worshiped where their masters did; in Charleston, the opposite was the pattern for most blacks in the Reformed tradition. Whether rural or urban, these black Calvinists, according to Clarke, constituted a distinct community noted, much like their white counterpart, for their sober and orderly character.

Many of the blacks were of course women. Women in fact constituted a substantial majority of church members by the antebellum period. Clarke, making mention of women for the first time in the nineteenth century, claims that a “feminization” of the churches occurred between the Revolution and the Civil War, in which the churches “took on many of the values of domesticity, became increasingly concerned with questions of nurture and propriety, and felt the powerful but indirect role of women who, as in the home, had to resort to subtle means of influence” (p. 153). That may be so, but one wonders whether female membership, like that of blacks, first greatly increased in the Great Awakening and set the stage for female influence in the antebellum period. Whatever the origin of female ascendancy within the churches, they found an important place not only there but in the various benevolent organizations of the city, especially those associated with missions and education. Congregational and Presbyterian women tended to control these groups. Two such active women were the Grimke sisters, members of the Third Presbyterian Church. Angelina eventually was forced North. Mary remained a member all her life.

During the antebellum period, the Reformed white male community in the low country continued to have an influence beyond their numbers in the economic and intellectual life of the region. They were particularly prominent in attempts to diversify the economy beyond King Rice. Reformed members represented a disproportionate number of the business and professional elite in Charleston. The Circular Congregational Church alone provided three governors of the state between 1800 and 1832, including Robert Hayne, one of the most influential politicians in the state during the period, and Langdon Cheeves who became Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

In the intellectual realm, the South Carolina Calvin-

ists were equally impressive in their accomplishments. They played leading roles in the establishment of the College of Charleston in 1804 and the Columbia Theological Seminary a quarter century later. Most of the students at both institutions were Presbyterians, including perhaps the two most noted graduates of the college, Hugh Legare and William Gilmore Simmes. The leading member of the faculty at Columbia was the Presbyterian James Henley Thornwell. The world view they prized, Clarke underscores, was the *via media*—the middle ground between the excesses of reason and the heart, centered in natural law, combining Common Sense Realism and Protestant Scholasticism. In this view, society was organic but disordered and slavery not a positive blessing, as many Southern apologists for the peculiar institution were coming to claim by the late antebellum period, but a consequential “necessary evil” that Christians had the stern duty to defend. On the other hand, the enemies of slavery, Thornwell preached, should remember that the “Gospel does not propose to make our present state a perfect one—to make our earth a heaven” (p. 194). Nonetheless, intellectuals such as Thornwell wishfully saw in southern society a paternalistic, class-stratified, family centered Christian reality that constituted a potential utopia, which liberal, capitalistic society could only corrupt by its interference. Most important for Thornwell and other conservative thinkers was the “Spirituality of the Church,” which required that the institution not become involved in the political order but stay strictly within its own orbit.

With secession, the South was poised to become the Holy Commonwealth that had been America’s vision, or the saving remnant of the Chosen People. Southern Calvinists established the Presbyterian Church of the Confederacy, with its headquarters in Charleston. Its history proved much longer than the Confederacy. When Charleston went up in flames in the closing months of the war, low country Calvinism was itself transformed. White Congregationalism—suffering from Sherman’s devastation, an identification with the North, and a gradual move toward Presbyterianism—was effectively a casualty of the war. Only the African American congregation at Plymouth Church in Charleston kept alive the Congregational tradition in the low country. The Presbyterians themselves survived, briefly as an integrated church, then permanently from the 1870s as a racially segregated community, with minimal losses in black members, about twenty percent, mostly in Charleston where blacks had historically exercised comeouter tendencies. The rural black Presbyterian churches were

largely led by white or black missionary pastors from the North.

Many of the black pastors, ignoring the “Spirituality of the Church” principle, also became effective political leaders during Reconstruction, among them Francis Cardoza who served as secretary of state and state treasurer during Republican administrations. Lay members also became important political leaders. Thomas Ezekiel Miller became state chairman of the Republican party and a member of the United States Congress in the 1880s. With northern philanthropy, these African American churches established a network of schools, nearly fifty of them by 1917, that gave its members educational opportunities up to the junior college level. Whether rural or urban, these black congregations were composed of great networks of extended families long rooted in the Calvinist tradition. Beyond this tribal core, black Presbyterianism experienced little growth between Reconstruction and the Second World War. Black outmigration and a perception of northern white control of the Presbyterian black churches were, Clarke suggests, factors in this failure, as was an inability to synthesize the competing impulses of two traditions, one African American and the other Reformed Protestantism.

For white Presbyterians, family rooted continuity was also the pattern for the six decades following the end of Reconstruction. As Clarke observes, “the white low country churches became more intensely parochial, more narrowly focused in their interests and activities and a kind of ‘backwater’ in American religious life rather than the influential force they had been during earlier days” (p. 259). Ministers increasingly came from the region and were trained in local institutions. Women continued to constitute the majority in the congregations. A “rising bureaucratic-minded middle class” asserted its values upon the church. Church discipline gave way to pastoral counseling. Testimony of regeneration as a prerequisite for membership was replaced by a requirement of respectability. Social centers were built instead of lecture rooms. Organs, choirs, and recited prayers found their way into worship services.

For the Low Country, as well as Carolina white Calvinism, the Second World War became a revitalizing turning point, as the region, anchoring the eastern end of the “Sun Belt,” increasingly prospered from an infusion of federal monies and northern immigrants. What had historically been a region demographically dominated by blacks now became heavily white, with blacks making up

only a third of the population by 1980. White Presbyterians grew at an even greater rate than the general white population of the area, nearly tripling between 1940 and 1980. By the end of the 1980s, the South Carolina Presbytery was the second fastest growing in the nation. New members were largely immigrants, mostly affluent, older, professionals, and increasingly males. By 1990, church membership was nearly equal along the gender divide, and women were moving into formal leadership, including pastors and elders. For black Carolina Calvinists, the old pattern of membership characterized by traditional families persisted. Unlike their white counterparts, African American Presbyterians continued to be nearly two-thirds women, many of whom were now exercising roles of formal leadership, especially as elders. Although a small minority within the African-American community, black Presbyterians had played a disproportionately large role in the Civil Rights movement of the region during the 1960s.

In the 1980s, the Charleston dominated Southern Presbyterian Church finally reunited with the Northern United Presbyterian Church. In its wake came a reunion of white and black Presbyterians in the low country, opening up new possibilities, Clarke optimistically concludes, that an “African American Reformed tradition that was forged between two worlds ... could provide the community a new identity and new pathways to the future” for a denomination that cherishes the motto “The Church Reformed, but always being reformed” (p. 289).

of the Reformed Tradition that is particularly sensitive to the interplay between religious community and the social context with which it interacted. He is much stronger in treating the pre-Redemption history of Carolina Calvinism. The post-Reconstruction period gets a scant thirty pages, resulting in some very broad strokes about developments within the churches over a hundred and twenty year span. In part, this reflects the decline of the community as well as the immediacy of recent history. In all, it is a valuable contribution to our understanding of an often neglected tradition within the Southern religious experience.

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