H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

O. Kendall White, Daryl White. *Religion in the Contemporary South: Diversity, Community, and Identity (Southern Anthropological Society Proceedings).* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995. ix + 172 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1675-8; $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-1676-5.

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In 1941, the sociologist W. J. Cash published a classic interpretation of the South entitled *The Mind of the South*. This 1995 publication, edited by the sociologist Kendall and the anthropologist Daryl White, could well be titled *The Soul of the South*. Nonetheless the South of which Cash spoke and of which the White's anthology speaks is a very different South indeed. The rural, pastoral South has undergone a transformation of urbanization and industrialization. Even more significantly, the monolithic South has undergone a transition to diversity, including religious diversity.

This collection of essays about religion in the contemporary South is No. 28 in the *Proceedings of the Southern Anthropological Society*. The tone and tenor of fieldwork and the methodology and vocabulary of social science are pervasive. A recurring motif is the claim, with supporting evidence, that the South, and its religious expressions in particular, is not what you might think it to be. Common stereotypes and actual realities do not necessarily match.

The fifteen essays are grouped under four headings. Time is a common concern in the essays of Part 1. Notwithstanding the dimension of transcendence, religion is manifest in the temporal sphere. Religion in the South is not monolithic in its sense of time. In the past, the dominant perspective of southern religion emphasized the past as something to be remembered. In contemporary southern religion, time can be repeated in rituals which manifest the eternal and sacred as cycles of human history.

Self-identity is a common concern in the essays of Part 2. Unfortunately, the essays in this section concentrate on those who establish their own identity by rejection, and even vilification, of others. Positive approaches to establishing self-identity are simply ignored.

In Part 3 a common concern is to explore the blending of the religious and the secular and the blending of the new and the traditional in contemporary southern religion. For example, a study of Christian schools includes an analysis of students' prayer requests which leads to this observation: "The fact that they ask God for things has as its source conservative Christian ideology. But the things they ask God for are the things they've learned to want from American popular culture"(92).

The common theme in the essays of Part 4 is cultural shifts, or at least cultural stirrings. The Bible Belt is undergoing the processes of globalization, feminization, and revitalization.

In common parlance, "the devil is in the details"; but for this book quite the opposite is the case. Even someone who is quite familiar with the South will be enriched by these participant observations of specific groups, including southern Catholics, Native Americans, Unitarians-Universalists, and Hindus, as well as some of the standard groups, such as African-American, Appalachian, and storefront churches. It's the next best thing to participating yourself.

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