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Kathryn Carlisle Schwartz. *Baptist Faith in Action: The Private Writings of Maria Baker Taylor, 1813-1895.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003. xxx + 399 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-497-8.

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The Southern Evangelical Mind in Florida

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In April 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. chastised a group of "liberal" white Alabama ministers in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" for their criticism of his civil rights demonstrations. Though originally targeted at eight ministers, the famous epistle became an indictment of white southern evangelicalism's obstinacy to integration. Partly in response to King but also to the turbulent events of the Sixties and Seventies, pioneering scholars of southern religion such as Samuel Hill tried to understand the origins of this conservative mentality and how it evolved throughout southern history. Not surprisingly, these early studies of southern evangelicalism emphasized the racially oppressive status quo that white divines helped maintain in the Old and New South.[1]

More recent research, however, has delved into the sophisticated side of southern evangelicals. Monographs by Paul Harvey and Beth Barton Schweiger, for example, both highlighted more progressive elements of the nineteenth-century churches.[2] As a result, historians have begun to understand that southern evangelicalism was not simply held in "cultural captivity" by the region's commitment to male hierarchy and white supremacy. A welcome and timely addition to this historiographical trend, Kathryn Carlisle Schwartz's skillfully edited *Baptist Faith in Action* presents the "inquiring and capacious" intellect of a southern Baptist woman and the family that she reared in South Carolina and Florida (p. 336). Schwartz's book is a collection of the voluminous writings of her great-grandmother, Maria Baker Taylor. Though Taylor never gained fame during or after her lifetime, her surviving personal writings in the form of letters, diaries, poetry, and anonymous publications illuminate the essence of her lengthy adult existence. Readers are treated to a rich and detailed account of religion on the nineteenth-century southern frontier.

Schwartz carefully distills one-tenth of her great-grandmother's voluminous writing–approximately 650,000 words–into four chronologically arranged sections,. Each of these parts roughly corresponds to twenty-year periods in Taylor's lifetime. The first section covers her childhood and education, 1813-1833. Taylor was born in Sumter County, South Carolina into a prosperous planter family. Her mother, Rachel Furman Baker was the daughter of the noted Baptist theologian Richard Furman. Maria's upbringing was without a doubt one of privilege, but not of materialistic and conspicuous consumption. She attended boarding school in Charleston and the surviving correspondence of her parents and other family members demonstrated their commitment to her education. Preparing her for a life of faith as well as guidance for moral conduct dominated Maria's schooling as her family did not want her education to only be a "social adornment for an upper-class woman" (p. 25). The second section, spanning 1834-1852, comprises the first two decades of Maria's marriage to John Morgandollar Taylor and their life in the Beaufort District of South Carolina. Taylor gave birth to the first eleven of the couple's thirteen children during these years and the cycles of childbirth and pregnancy dominated her life. Despite the obvious physical limitations during these years, Taylor also managed to be quite active in her local congregation.

Florida historians, however, will arguably find the third section, which brackets the years 1853-1875, of most interest. The two decades mark Maria 's most productive years of writing as well as her family's residence at Osceola Plantation in Ocala. Her thoughts and observations on slavery, her children's education, the Civil War, and Reconstruction illuminate the tragic era in central Florida. Taylor certainly believed in the legitimacy of the peculiar institution, and later the Confederate cause. Yet her writings reveal that she was not a stubborn reactionary. In a letter to her grandchildren, for example, Taylor asked, "Who would not seek to be an intellectual? The Bible above all books quickens the intellect,

enlarges the heart and mind.Then if the simple would understand knowledge, let us seek it in scriptures. Let us drink deeply at this fountain of true wisdom, the wisdom cometh down from above" (p. 255). The fourth section comprises Taylor's old age in Gainesville, 1874-1893. Her writings during these final years also demonstrate Maria's insatiable intellect. Besides her daily reading of the Bible, she frequently explored branches of faith outside of her Baptist worldview. She read Methodist and Presbyterian sermons, studied the history of Islam and Mormonism, and original works of theology by Luther and Swedenborg. Her commitment to self-education also included staying informed on current events and trends by reading national and regional periodicals. Indeed, Taylor's writing provides evidence that nineteenth-century evangelicals were more complex than once considered.

In the epilogue, Schwartz argues that Taylor's religiosity guided her thoughts and actions down to a minute level. Taylor's concern for her own as well as her family members' salvation demonstrated the power of "Baptist faith in action." Furthermore, scholars will find Taylor's writings to be a rich source for a number of fields–gender studies, plantation life, and education–to name but a few. Schwartz's commentary, which is sympathetic but not apologetic of her ancestor, will also prove to be helpful. Thoroughly footnoted with references to relevant and recent historiography, the book will certainly aid the quests of future researchers.

Notes

[1]. Samuel S. Hill, Jr. *Southern Churches in Crisis*; (New York, N.Y.: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1967); See also John Lee Eighmy, *Southern Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1972)

[2]. Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Beth Barton Schweiger, *The Gospel Working Up: Progress and Pulpit in Nineteenth-Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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