

# H-Net Reviews

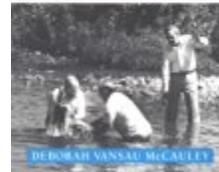
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Deborah Vansau McCauley. *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995. xiv + 551 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02129-9; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06414-2.

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## Appalachian Mountain Religion A History



The people of the upland South were long known to Americans as a “peculiar people” given to inbreeding, moonshining, quilting, clogging, and feuding. Nineteenth-century accounts of the mountain people spoke of them as “our contemporary ancestors,” where Americans met themselves as they used to be. Home missions propagandists insisted that these good Anglo-Saxon folk needed uplift and Christianization; indeed, after the withdrawal of northern missionary societies from direct evangelization among the freedpeople of the South, many of them turned their attention to Appalachian folk. Few of them noted that Appalachian folk were, in fact, intensely religious, but in a way which differed from and even challenged American denominational triumphalism.

In Deborah Vansau McCauley, mountain religion has at last found its most comprehensive and insightful historian. In this work, McCauley provides an important and compellingly argued reinterpretation of the origins and development of Protestantism as it is practiced in the mountains. She sees mountain religion as a vital tradition which lives on despite early and greatly exaggerated reports of its imminent death. Her book is spiced with accounts of contemporary worship services in mountain churches.

From its crystallization in the early nineteenth century, mountain religion has deliberately remained apart from mainstream denominationalism. American denominationalism has its closest intellectual roots in the New Divinity School of theology and in the revivals of Charles Grandison Finney of the 1820s and 1830s, the “New Lights” of the nineteenth century, who brought to Amer-

ican Protestantism Arminianized ideas of man’s vital role in the salvation process. These ideas have been transmitted through generations of ministers and evangelists from Finney to Dwight Moody to Billy Graham. Mountain religion, by contrast, draws from Jonathan Edwards’s concepts of the action of grace and the Spirit on undeserving humans. As McCauley shows clearly in a wonderful series of historical chapters, mountain religious worship and theology derives from a mixture of Scots-Irish “sacramental revivalism,” German Pietism, colonial Baptist revival culture, and anti-missions groups in the early nineteenth century. All of these came together after the Camp Meetings of the early nineteenth century (centered in the Upland South, particularly in Cane Ridge in Kentucky) to form a distinctive style of religious expression which remains the basis of mountain religion today.

In the 1820s, as ideas of missions boards and other denominational agencies preoccupied America’s religious leaders, religious folk in the Upland South took a determined stand against the Arminian theology of standard American evangelicalism. They remained true to their doctrines of waiting with a “sweet hope” for the action of the Spirit. Later in the nineteenth century, Protestant denominations began extensive home missions work in the mountains, conceiving of the mountaineers (as they were called then) as deprived of true religion, ignoring the vital presence of religiosity in the daily lives of the mountaineers and ignoring as well the tradition of native preaching in the mountains. McCauley extends her polemic against denominational missions work in the mountains to the later twentieth century, with acidly incisive commentary on the retranslation of “So-

cial Gospel” ideas into current-day “liberation theology” in the mountains, which still operates from a fundamentally paternalist view of bringing the light of true religion to deprived mountain folk.

In addition to her historical excavations, McCauley brings the insight of extensive participant observation of mountain religious services ranging from semi-respectable town churches, through the nearly infinite variety of Baptist groups, to the scattered Holiness churches in the mountains. Interspersed with the historical and sociological chapters are accounts of religious services and tales drawn from the lives of contemporary older mountain preachers. McCauley often quotes from sermons and personal conversations with mountain religious folk and then demonstrates the historical roots of their views. For example, after her chapters on Scots-Irish sacramental revivalism (in which she draws on Leigh Eric Schmidt’s *Holy Fairs* to explain the uses of revivals for Calvinists, which to me had always been something of a theological mystery) and colonial Baptist practices, she introduces her observations of current-day practices of “sacrament” (communion) in mountain churches, along with footwashing.

Along the way, McCauley provides extensive commentary on some of the major works of denominational publicists as well as travelers on mountain life, so much so that her book often serves as a kind of extended (and very opinionated) annotated bibliography on literature about the mountain people. She also provides a wonderful bibliographical essay. The only works she fails to cite are Bertram Wyatt Brown’s 1970 *Journal of Southern History* article on the origins of anti-missions (“The Anti-Mission Movement in the Jacksonian South: A Study in Regional Folk Culture,” *Journal of Southern History* 36 (1970): 501-29), and Cecil Lambert’s study of the anti-mission Baptists (*The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists: Sources and Leaders, 1800-1840* (New York, 1980)). Otherwise, she seems to have read and digested virtually everything written about mountain religion, including obscure but fascinating nineteenth-century texts.

I believe McCauley’s analysis is slightly off-base on one point. By 1840, McCauley argues, southern denominational groups, namely the Baptists and Methodists, had given themselves wholly to centralized, hierarchical programs in line with northern denominational groups. They had developed, she asserts, a thoroughly Arminianized theology which stressed a person’s role in their own salvation. This would certainly surprise James P. Boyce, the major Southern Baptist theologian of the mid-nineteenth century, who was widely known for his works of pristine theological Calvinism. More importantly, at the level of actual practice, thousands of southern churches across the region remained much more closely tied to traditionalist practices than McCauley would allow. She condemns southern churches for caving in to the slaveholder’s world view and for, in fact, being dominated by the planters. There is truth in this charge, but it is overstated in the work. She dates too early the demise of plain-folk camp-meeting religion among the Southern Baptists and Southern Methodists. Even into the twentieth century, leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention and Methodist Church were constantly complaining about the “backward” worship of their folk in language very much like that which they used to condemn mountain religion.

This is a relatively minor criticism. Deborah Vansau McCauley has produced a work that never fails to be interesting and informative, is often suggestive and illuminating, and sometimes stuns the reader with unexpected insight and with complex historical connections which shed light on topics long ill-understood in American religious history. The prose, if at times a tad repetitious, is clear and engaging. Even though the book weighs in at a lengthy 550 pages, non-specialists will find it a good read. McCauley’s work will become the standard work on this long-neglected subject.

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