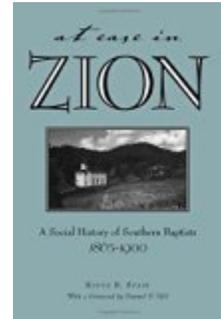


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rufus B. Spain. *At Ease in Zion: A Social History of Southern Baptists, 1865-1900*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003. xxii + 247 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5038-3.

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## Missed Opportunities

Rufus B. Spain, Professor Emeritus of History at Baylor University, made a substantial contribution to our understanding of the Southern Baptists' development in the postbellum and Victorian South with the original publication of this book, which is a revision of his 1961 doctoral dissertation for Vanderbilt University. As Samuel S. Hill notes in his forward, serious studies of religion in the South were in their infancy in the early 1960s, sparked—he asserts—by Henry Swint's late 1950s seminar in southern history at Vanderbilt which Spain, David Edwin Harrell, Jr., and Milton Baughn took as graduate students “who wanted to investigate their own faith traditions” (p. ix). Spain used the weekly denominational papers published in the twelve southern states comprising the Southern Baptist Convention, as well as the minutes of the state and regional conventions, to form a portrait of a denomination that had formed out of a defense of slavery in 1845, emphatically endorsed secession and Confederate nationalism during the Civil War, and resisted the emergence of the New South in the years following Reconstruction. Chapter 1 describes their increasing ties to local and state politics geared to “achieving certain moral and religious ends” while maintaining adherence to the separation of church and state “insofar as direct aid to church institutions was concerned” (p. 43). Chapters 2 through 4 deal specifically with relations between whites and African Americans, which is a story of mutual self-segregation and suspicion, with white Southern Baptists marginalizing their black coreligionists. Chapter 5 on economics reveals their resignation to laissez-faire capitalism and hesitating support for labor unions and industrialism. The concluding chapters chronicle the

development of a limited social consciousness and campaigns on behalf of Sabbatarianism, temperance, anti-gambling legislation, and financial relief for Confederate widows and orphans, while vigorously resisting penal reforms and women's rights. Yet, for all their outspoken conservatism, Spain rightly noted that Southern Baptists did seek to mold their environment, if only “to conform to their standards” in ways that were consonant with the efforts of more liberal denominations throughout the United States (p. 214).

As illuminating as this book is for students continuing their early studies of southern Christianity, the criticisms of the book's first reviewers concerning Spain's shallow evidentiary base and narrow focus remain as valid as ever.[1] The inclusion of sermonic literature and private correspondence would have gone a long way to creating a far more detailed and nuanced study of the Southern Baptists that might have served as a springboard to understanding how and why the denomination grew in the twentieth century to comprise forty-five percent of all Baptists in the United States with affiliated churches in all fifty states by 1990.[2] Despite the discussion of race relations in three chapters, African Americans never emerge from the white shadows, but appear as passive, two-dimensional figures permitting their marginalization, which is terribly simplistic.[3] However, Samuel S. Hill justifiably credits *At Ease in Zion* as a pioneering work that has led to “the study of religion in the American South ... achiev[ing] major standing since 1967,” which it most certainly is, and it deserves to remain in print (p. xi). One cannot help, nevertheless, wish-

ing that Spain had been willing or able to undertake a revision of his magnum opus to incorporate so much of the important work in the field that has been done since the book was first published. Many similarly pioneering works emerged to fill in the empty spaces Spain left behind, and with any luck it will spark continued scholarship on a significant facet of American religious history.

#### Notes

[1]. See James Findlay's review in *The American Historical Review*, 73, no. 3 (February 1968), p. 929 and see Neal C. Gillespie's review in *The Journal of Southern History*, 34, no. 1 (February 1968), pp. 133-134.

[2]. Edwin S. Gaustad and Philip Barlow, *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 86-89.

[3]. See for example E. M. Brawley, *The Negro Baptist Pulpit: A Collection of Sermons and Papers by Colored Baptist Ministers* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971); Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

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