

Paul Harvey. *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xvi + 338 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2901-1.



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It is impossible to discuss the South without discussing religion. It animates and haunts southern culture. From prayers uttered on fall Friday nights under the football stadium lights to pick-up trucks displaying Confederate flags alongside "What Would Jesus Do?" bumper stickers, expressions of faith saturate the South. And when liberals and conservatives, blacks and whites, feminists and "family first" advocates employ Christian rhetoric and styles, they tap into a long history of dynamic interactions between religion and society in the South--a history that Paul Harvey discusses brilliantly in his latest work. In this amazingly successful book, Harvey provides a grand and sweeping examination of religion and southern culture from the Civil War to the present. With terrific dexterity and succinct prose, he mixes and matches hundreds of individual biographies and stories to show religion's power in southern politics, reform crusades, and cultural expression.

Spanning more than one hundred years of historical time and more than ten states of geographical space, Harvey anchors his analysis to

three central themes: theological racism (the use of religious ideas and behaviors to nurture social hierarchies); racial interchange (the exchanges of religious cultures between whites and blacks); and Christian interracialism (the cooperation of white and black Christians in an assortment of enterprises). Harvey suggests that although theological racism dominated the South at the beginning of the twentieth century, the combination of interracial exchanges and Christian interracial encounters turned southern religion away from racism and helped generate the civil rights movement. By the end of the twentieth century, southern religion was no longer defined by its racist heritage.

In the first section, which comprises chapters 1 and 2, Harvey investigates the complex connections among religion and politics from the Civil War to the 1950s. Largely following Daniel Stowell's superb book on religion and Reconstruction, Harvey suggests that southern whites, northern whites, and African Americans held different visions for what "Reconstruction" meant politically and religiously.[1] While northern white mission-

aries viewed themselves as the harbingers of civilization to the war-ravaged and presumably backward South, African Americans hoped that their era of bondage would be followed by one of social, political, and religious freedom. For their part, southern whites believed that God chastised them for their sinful ways with the war, but that the Lord still smiled upon white supremacy. By the 1890s, southern white Protestants re-ascended and took control of the region, and their evangelicism served as a crucial ideological support for segregation as it had for slavery.

While Jim Crow and theological racism dominated the South from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, a number of reform movements maintained an undercurrent of dissent and their short-lived interracial coalitions paved the way for the full-scale Civil Rights movement. Southern Populists, Harvey demonstrates, combined evangelical pietism with rural protest to call the nation to a form of primitive Christianity and agrarian virtue. Middle-class Progressives employed the language of Protestant missions to denounce liquor, child labor, and an assortment of other "evils." And radical groups, such as the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and the Fellowship of Christian Churchmen, denounced lynching and Jim Crow. At the end of the day, these movements were unable to overturn the white supremacist theological basis of southern white society, but their crusades and attempts at interracial cooperation demonstrated that Jim Crow never reigned uncontested in the South.

In the middle chapter and second section, Harvey interrupts his discussion of religious and political organizing to dive head first into the realm of culture and racial interchange. What he finds is impressive, if not staggering. Black and white southerners traded, transformed, and embraced one another's religious cultures, including impassioned sermons, inspirational revival services, folk melodies, gospel songs, spiritual visions, and baptismal ceremonies. At his best when

unearthing the interracial roots of the Blues, Harvey shows how gospel music, spirituals, and hymns mixed to create a generation of folk theologians in the form of blues singers. These entertainers harmonized about good and evil, ethics, and morality often in ways more complicated than their ministerial colleagues. In short, legal segregation could not stop Elvis Presley, Ray Charles, or Hank Williams from sampling a variety of black and white religious traditions; nor could it stop radio revivalists from appealing to all souls--whether they were cloaked with light or dark skin.

Racial interchanges and Christian interracialism reached their peak when they mixed with political organizing during the Civil Rights era--the subject of chapter 4. With excellent nuance, Harvey shows that although white and black church institutions tended either to avoid or to undermine the battle for legal rights, religious beliefs were profoundly important for individual activists. Faith bound civil rights workers together and steeled them with courage to withstand verbal assaults, fire hoses, and beatings. "We Shall Overcome," the unofficial hymn of the movement, was at the same time a song of fellowship, prophecy, and inspiration. It articulated the cooperative, communal, nonviolent, and sacred elements of the movement. And in the wake of the civil rights crusade, the theological racism of the previous hundred years tumbled. Southern white ministers and theologians slowly backed away, and at times repudiated, their arguments on behalf of segregation, and many white church leaders actually supported the federal government's assault on Jim Crow.

Harvey's final chapter suggests that in the years following the civil rights movement, gender supplanted race as the "bedrock defining principle of God-ordained hierarchy" (pp. 219-220). Focusing primarily on the Southern Baptist Convention, Harvey shows that while southern conservatives dispensed with biblical arguments for racial

segregation, they turned with renewed vigor to keeping women "in their place." Ending his superb study, Harvey makes a statistical argument for the continued importance, but not dominance, of evangelicalism in the South, and he provides readers with an extensive bibliography.

Harvey has written a marvelous book. But there are several ways in which it can be criticized, including his failure to explain why evangelical women tended to be more willing to cooperate interracially than men and his neglect of such paramount southern cultural moments as the Scopes trial. The most problematic aspect of the book, however, is Harvey's approach to theological racism. To put it bluntly, Harvey's definition is too limited. White supremacist theology, a longer but more accurate title for the phenomena he discusses, went much deeper than the use of religious teachings to maintain social hierarchies; it connected whiteness with godliness and blackness with ungodliness in ways that sanctified whites' activities and damned people of color as subhuman. It was a system that endeavored to define the people of God not as an imagined *faith* community, but as a racial one.

If Harvey were to have expanded his approach to theological racism to include the racialization of sacred images, he would have found a treasure trove. He would have found, in fact, that many African Americans in the South were asking theological questions and developing religious answers that prefigured the arguments of black liberation theologians of the late 1960s and 1970s. Well before the urban riots of the North and the theological writings of black liberationists such as James Cone and J. Deotis Roberts, a host of African Americans in the South wanted to know whose side God was on--and many refused to believe that Jesus was the blonde-haired, blue-eyed man that American artwork presented him to be. W. E. B. Du Bois, for instance, denounced whites for assuming that "of all the hues of God whiteness alone is inherently and obviously better than the

brownness and tan," and he repeatedly longed for a "black Christ"--or at least a non-white Jesus to be recognized.[2] Or, similarly, Langston Hughes denounced racism in the United States by considering how white Americans would treat a black Christ in his poem, "Bible Belt," first published in 1966:

"It would be too bad if Jesus / Were to come back black. / There are so many churches / Where he could not pray / In the U.S.A., / Where entrances to Negroes, / No matter how sanctified, / Is denied, / Where race, not religion, / Is glorified. / But say it-- / *You* may be / Crucified." [3]

Mississippi civil rights worker Anne Moody also struggled with the race and role of God in ways that black theologians grappled with later. After the church bombing in Birmingham, she announced to God that she was done with nonviolence. "If you don't believe me," she wrote, "then I know you must be white, too. And if I ever find out you are white, then I'm through with you. And if I find out you are black, I'll try my best to kill you when I get to heaven." [4] By neglecting the responses of African Americans to the linking of whiteness and godliness, Harvey overlooked the roots of black liberation theology that were in the soil that he so meticulously plowed.

But even without a discussion of the battle over the racialization of the divine, Harvey has written an impressive book. Its depth, range, complexity, and readability will not surprise anyone familiar with his other work. Graduate courses on southern history and southern religion will be incomplete without it, and undergraduate classes on the South following the Civil War should use this text. Casual readers may find the seemingly endless array of biographical examples tiring, but they will undoubtedly complete this book feeling that they had learned much. They will have witnessed with new eyes the sinful saints and the sanctimonious sinners of the southern religious past.

Notes

[1]. Daniel W. Stowell, *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863-1877* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[2]. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1920; reprint, Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999), pp. 18, 31.

[3]. Langston Hughes, "Bible Belt," In *The Panther and The Lash: Poems of Our Times* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 38.

[4]. Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), p. 318.

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