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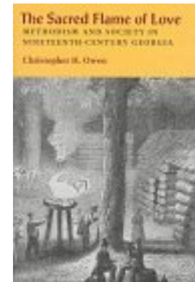

Christopher H. Owen. *The Sacred Flame of Love: Methodism and Society in Nineteenth-Century Georgia.* Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1998. xx + 290 pp. $50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8203-1963-6.

Reviewed by Thomas A. Scott

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Christopher Owen's new book is a well-documented case study of the rise of Methodism in nineteenth-century Georgia. The title comes from a remark by early Georgia convert, Daniel Grant, who rejoiced in the success of Methodist preaching and prayed that God would "Increase the sacred Flame of Love." Between 1800-1900 American Wesleyans moved from the fringes to the center of power and respectability. By the Civil War Methodism was the largest Protestant persuasion in Georgia and nationwide. Owen argues that a one-state, one faith study has the virtue of restoring complexities and nuances often absent from more general studies. Rather than offering sweeping new theories about southern religion, Owen claims only to provide a building block toward a fuller assessment. Given this modest objective, the author succeeds very well.

A revision and expansion of a 1991 Emory University dissertation, *Sacred Flame of Love* uses a wide assortment of church records and personal papers of Methodist clerical and lay leaders. In addition to the rich collections at Emory, Owen mined the major repositories in Georgia and a few academic libraries in other states. The study is well-grounded in an abundance of secondary sources, particularly works published before the mid-1990s. Owen seems weakest (and writes his shortest chapters) on Methodism before about 1820. For the mid- and late-nineteenth-centuy, however, the work is richly detailed and stimulating, particularly on the Wesleyan response to slavery and segregation.

Regarding slavery, the author deserves credit for taking seriously what Methodist spokesmen actually said. John Wesley denounced human bondage as "the sum of all villainies," and early Methodists in Georgia joined their brethren elsewhere in condemning the institution. As the nineteenth century progressed, southern Wesleyans learned to subdue their critique, in order to grow in membership. Even in their most pro-slavery moments, however, they stopped short of saying that human bondage was a good thing. Unlike Calvinist intellectuals such as Charles Colcock Jones, Methodists rarely used the Old Testament patriarchs and their hierarchical values to buttress the pro-slavery case. Relying mainly on the letters attributed to Paul, Georgia Wesleyans argued that slavery was scripturally allowable, but

not necessarily ideal. In the ante-bellum era their theoretical position was neither proslavery nor antislavery, but neutrality. Christians lived in an imperfect world where slavery was sanctioned by law; therefore, the church should coexist with slavery, just as it did in Paul's day. However, the Wesleyan religious press refused to carry notices of escaped slaves, claiming that Paul may have sent Onesimus back to his master Philemon, but the sainted apostle "never advertised" that Onesimus was a runaway.

Owen gives a plausible interpretation of the split of American Wesleyanism in 1844 and the creation of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. It is well known that the rift came over Georgia Bishop James O. Andrew's acquisition of slaves. Ironically, Andrew was chosen bishop by the General Conference of 1832, because he owned no bondsmen (although servants belonging to others were provided for his use). In an age when a woman's property routinely passed at marriage to her husband, Owen became a slaveholder when he remarried, following the death of his first wife. The bishop thought that he could avoid controversy by deeding his human property back to his spouse, but northern delegates to the 1844 General Conference demanded his resignation. A peacemaker, Andrew would have given up his post, except for the southern delegation's strong urging that he stand firm. The southerners feared that they would lose influence at home, if they gave into northern "ultraism." In the end Methodists, North and South, agreed to an amicable divorce, with a prorated division of church assets. Both sides displayed a measure of moderation, with the Georgia Methodists supporting the legalization of slave marriages and keeping antislavery references in their *Discipline* until 1857, and the northern Methodist Episcopal Church waiting almost to the end of the Civil War before barring slaveholders from membership.

In 1861 southern bishops kept their regional denomination from officially backing secession. After the Confederacy became a reality, white Georgia Methodists supported it, since their church *Discipline* required obedience to whatever government was in power. After southern defeat, they had no difficulty submitting again to the authority of the U.S.A. in secular matters, while yielding to no one but God in matters sacred. Owen believes that the southern church actually came out of the war stronger than ever. An institution not under government control, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS), gave white Wesleyans a refuge from nothern cultural and political domination. Meanwhile, black Methodists flocked out of the Caucasian-controlled denomination into the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and the Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, where former bondsmen found bastions against the destructive influence of white supremacy.

The book does not neglect the black churches, but seems stronger in detailing the internal workings of the white MECS. After Reconstruction, the latter continued to grow in numbers but became more fragmented ideologically. While town churches dominated Presbyterian and Episcopal denominations and rural folk made up an overwhelming majority of Baptists, the Methodists had strong urban AND rural wings. Thus, the Wesleyans were the evangelical Christians who were most vulnerable to ideological disputes between urban-based modernists, advocating a New South, and rural-centered traditionalists, yearning for the old-time religion. Owen divides Georgia Methodists of the late 1800s into several major persuasions: progressives and neoconservatives on the modernist side and Old Methodists, evangelists, and Holiness folk in the traditionalist camp. Church architecture exemplified this split, with poorer, rural congregations maintaining simple frame structures and looking askance at beautiful, new town churches, with steeples, bell towers, and organs. The segregated churches of 1900 obviously no longer united blacks and whites. The urban/rural split showed that Wes-

leyans were further divided along class and geographical lines. Owen suggests that this inability to transcend social divisions made the church unattractive to potential members and helps to explain why the Methodists after 1900 evangelized a declining percentage of Georgia's people and fell far behind the Baptists in total membership.

Even a long review cannot adequately cover all the well-reasoned points of this fine study. Rather than presenting major revisionist interpretations of broad subjects, Owen gives numerous plausible critiques of the theses of others. The author certainly fine-tunes our understanding of southern social and intellectual life in the pivotal nineteenth-century. His arguments are perhaps strongest for the middle years and weakest at the beginning and end of that century. For example, in an introductory chapter on Georgia Methodists before 1800 the writer makes the briefest of comments on the Georgia sojourns of famous evangelists John Wesley and George Whitefield. This reviewer wishes that Owen had devoted more space to the impact of James Oglethorpe's Georgia experiment on these religious innovators. Wesley makes clear in his *Journal* that he came to Trustee Georgia as an idealistic Anglican clergyman, seeking his own salvation. During the boat ride over he encountered a remarkable group of Moravian pilgrims who set him on the quest for the saving faith which came full flower later in the Methodist movement. Furthermore, Georgia at the time was the only American colony where slavery was outlawed, a reality which perhaps influenced Wesley's staunch anti-slavery views. A full examination of this subject would seem particularly relevant in light of the major emphasis Owen places on race thoughout the book.

Sacred Flame of Love has appeared almost simultaneously with a number of provocative works on the roots of southern evangelical religion. For example, Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood's *Come Shouting to Zion* (UNC Press, 1998) gives a stimulating analysis of the pre-1830s origins of African-American Protestantism. Christine Leigh Heyrman's ***Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*** (Knopf 1997) presents a much more convincing explanation than Owen for the failure of early Wesleyans to reach the masses. Heyrman, for instance, argues that early Wesleyans were perceived as threatening traditional family values and grew only after conforming to mass expectations. Owen tells us that in 1820 Methodists composed only 3 percent of Georgia's population and, therefore, were too weak to transform society. He offers anti-slavery as one explanation, but perhaps could do more with other factors. Similarly, Owen ends his book with reflections on why Georgia Methodists dropped behind Baptists at the beginning of the twentieth-century. He raises questions which perhaps apply to a more general discussion of why American Methodists and other mainline Protestants experienced such dramatic drops in membership in the twentieth century. While his thesis for ideological disintegration is plausible, it cries for more definitive answers, based on a twentieth-century study as thoroughly done as the present work. With these minor suggestions, however, this reviewer strongly commends the book to anyone interested in Georgia or southern religious history.

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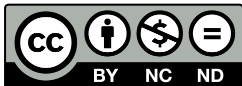

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