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Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920 (Book Review)

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Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865–1920. By Charles Reagan Wilson. (Athens: University of Georgia Press. 1980. Pp. viii, 256. \$19.95.)

In the decades after the Civil War, according to Charles Reagan Wilson, Southern ministers consciously created a religious myth for their defeated region—a vision of itself as a Redeemer Nation—as a way to bring order and consolation out of chaos. Wilson explores the manifestations of this “religion of the Lost Cause” in ritual and myth, in theology and education, in conflicts over race and industrialization.

Baptized in Blood has no difficulty demonstrating that Southern ministers introduced Christian themes, sang Christian hymns, and led Christian prayers at ceremonies commemorating the deaths of ex-Confederates or the dedication of Confederate memorials. It is hardly surprising, of course, that Southerners invoked their deeply held religion when loved ones died or that they clothed their sacrifice and suffering in the Civil War with a religious mantle. Most white Southerners had been convinced that the Bible sanctioned slavery and that the North had been the oppressor in the Civil War. God, many fervently believed, must have had a purpose in bringing defeat to the righteous South. Such a belief helped foster a sense of fatalism, since Southern poverty and failure seemed to be God’s will, at the same time it allowed Southerners to see themselves as a chosen people passing through the fires of tribulation toward salvation. The ironies produced by these two convictions would seem to be a fertile field for a historian of religion.

Intent on proving the existence of a vital and sharply defined Southern civil religion, though, Wilson does not say much about the tensions and ambiguities at the heart of such a phenomenon. It is a truism that some Southerners nurtured a hate for the North long after the Civil War ended and made saints of Confederate heroes. Wilson documents the words of those who would not forget the

Southern cause. But many other Southerners in the postwar South still considered themselves a legitimate, even essential, part of the original American Redeemer Nation. It seems difficult to explain in any other way the surprisingly rapid reconciliation of North and South after the terrible bloodshed each had inflicted on the other. The Lost Cause myth was indeed strong in the New South, but that it was not even more widespread and powerful than Wilson demonstrates would seem to invite exploration. Reading Wilson, it is difficult to avoid the feeling that he is talking about a relatively few people whose influence was felt at few times and places. As he admits, "The evidence is that, in their normal Christian services, Southerners did not worship the Confederacy" (p. 33). Unfortunately, his book focuses so narrowly on the champions of the Lost Cause that it presents a distorted picture of the religious life of the New South.

The only chapter in the book which wrestles with the complexity and limitations of the religion of the Lost Cause is the last, which documents the reconciliation of North and South in the early twentieth century. This is Wilson's strongest chapter, for here the differences and similarities of North and South emerge in a less exaggerated form. But his failure in the rest of the book to examine the forces and tendencies toward forgiveness makes it difficult to understand why Southerners could so wholeheartedly support and fight the Spanish-American War of 1898 and World War I. If they were so easily converted to the dominant civil religion in the first time of crisis, how deep and widespread could the Southern commitment to an antagonistic civil religion ever have been?

Despite the questions Wilson's book leaves unasked and unanswered, it does reveal an important rift in the New South that others have missed: Lost Cause ministers' penetrating jeremiads against the boosterism and commercialization of the South. Previous historians have portrayed most ministers of the region as enthusiastic apostles of industrialization, but Wilson demonstrates Southern evangelicals' lingering, brooding resistance to these changes. It is here, where Wilson insists upon diversity in the New South, that *Baptized in Blood* most furthers our understanding of that enigmatic region.

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