

# HARD, HARD RELIGION: FAITH AND CLASS IN THE NEW SOUTH

by

JOHN HERBERT HAYES

(Under the Direction of KATHLEEN CLARK)

## ABSTRACT

“Hard, Hard Religion: Faith and Class in the New South” argues that a fervent people’s religious culture permeated the rural New South, and was a central element in the persona and music of an iconic figure from that world, Johnny Cash. A distinct religious sensibility—a regional “popular religion,” or what one white farm laborer called “hard, hard religion”—constituted a central medium through which the rural poor, white and black, articulated and engaged with the hard everyday forces in their lives in the New South: confinement, marginality, injustice, and ridicule. This sensibility was not a static “old time religion,” an “otherworldly” compensation, or a psychological coping mechanism. Indeed, through the mediated forms of “folk” music and early “hillbilly” and “race” records, this popular religion has recurrently attracted outsiders for its complex engagement with modernity and its discontents, even though the dominant categories of historical analysis, those that conceptualize southern power relations and religion solely through the lens of race, have obscured it. I focus in on the persona and music of Johnny Cash, demonstrating that a principal aspect of his durable popular appeal was his creative engagement with the “hard, hard religion” he absorbed in his youth, in a rural community in Arkansas in the 1930s and ‘40s. In wrestling with the meaning of his inherited faith, Cash sang basic themes from the older culture—an abiding sense of evil and of perpetual struggle against darkness, a *via*

*negativa* as the path to God, a feeling of mystery and the stark limit in life, and a democratic spirit of favoritism for the lowly—into American popular culture from the 1960s until his death in 2003.

INDEX WORDS: Cash, Johnny; Poor—Southern States; Southern States—Religion; Southern States—History—1865-1950

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JOHN HERBERT HAYES

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M.T.S., Duke Divinity School, 2000

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JOHN HERBERT HAYES

Major Professor: Kathleen Clark

Committee: James Cobb  
Michael Winship  
Allan Kulikoff  
Michael Kwass

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
December 2007

*IN GRATEFUL MEMORY*

ELLEN HARVEY JERVIS

HERBERT BETHEA HAYES

WARREN TYREE CARR

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PREFACE  
WITH A BIBLE AND A GUN

It was summer 1993, and I was standing in a record shop in Amsterdam, jet-lagged, half-asleep, flipping absentmindedly through rows of cassette tapes. The sounds coming out of the store's speakers were keeping me awake: it was the strange new U2 album *Zooropa*, and I stood there in a daze listening intently to electronic noises, distorted voices, and lyrics springing out of that curious period of immediate post-Cold War uncertainty. Francis Fukuyama had recently proclaimed "the end of history" and the "victory of the VCR," for to him the demise of state socialism in eastern Europe demonstrated Western capitalism to be the social model that best "satisfies the most basic of human longings."<sup>1</sup> Certainly Europe felt like a place that history had just happened to, but what I could make out of the portrait on *Zooropa* hardly seemed satisfied.

Then, though the electronica and distortion continued, there was a new voice, stark and clear. As a plodding, fuzzy bass beat out a space age cowboy rhythm, it rang out: "I went out searching/ looking for one good man/ a spirit who would not bend or break/ who would sit at his father's right hand." Wait...that's—*Johnny Cash*? I listened more closely: "I went out walking/ with a Bible and a gun/ the word of God lay heavy on my heart/ I was sure I was the one/ now Jesus, don't you wait up/ Jesus, I'll be home soon..."<sup>2</sup> Garth Brooks' kitschy songs were about the only country I really knew, but *that* voice was unmistakable.

Many hours later, several thousand feet above the Atlantic, I listened repeatedly to my new purchase. I'd woken up but was still puzzled and confused. Much of the album appeared to

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<sup>1</sup> Fukuyama quoted in Daniel M. Bell, Jr. *Liberation Theology: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London: Routledge, 2001):1.

<sup>2</sup> U2 with Johnny Cash, "The Wanderer" *Zooropa* (Island Records, 1993)



be high satire, burlesque portraits of a world that seemed like some kind of carnivalesque zoo. That last song seemed like something different, though, and the liner notes told me it was “The Wanderer *Starring* Johnny Cash.” In the song, Cash’s character drifted through a decaying industrial dystopia, “where the ground won’t turn and the rain it burns,” where people sit outside a church and “say they want the kingdom but they don’t want God in it,” where “a thousand signs” on “that ol’ eight lane” signify only an alienated anomie. It struck me as quite serious, and Johnny’s spoken recitation in the middle of the song seemed like a retroactive confession: “Yeah I went out there/ in search of experience/ to taste and to touch/ and to feel as much/ as a man can/ before he repents.” “*Repents?*” Not exactly a word, or concept, that I heard in pop music. The closest thing I could relate Cash’s Wanderer to was the restlessly troubled, “Christ-haunted” southern backwoods characters I’d recently been reading about in the enigmatic stories of Flannery O’Connor.<sup>3</sup>

Knowing practically nothing about country music, not then a student of history, I heard Johnny Cash on “The Wanderer” then as a timeless voice, or rather one out of some very different past, singing of strange religious longings in a broken-down, apocalyptic modern world. I’d heard him sing the *Bonanza* theme song on the TV re-runs I used to watch when I was about nine, and “A Boy Named Sue” on the eight-track player in the family station wagon headed to Florida. And I’d heard “I Walk the Line” a few times on the oldies station. Those were the sum total of my associations.

In the summer of 1997, by spur-of-the-moment happenstance, I saw Cash play in a small venue in Atlanta. Not knowing he was in town, a friend and I got stuck in traffic and learned that Cash was the reason for the crowd. We bought scalped tickets and hurried in on the third song,

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<sup>3</sup> Flannery O’Connor, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” (1960 lecture at Wesleyan College) in Sally Fitzgerald, ed. *Flannery O’Connor: Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988):818

and Cash had a remarkable charisma. I was particularly struck by a song that Cash said was a new piece, a song called “Unchained.” It was basically a confessional prayer borne of confinement and humility: “...Oh have I seen an angel/ oh have I seen a ghost/ where’s that rock of ages/ when I need it most/ oh, oh, I am weak/ oh, I know I am vain/ take this weight from me/ let my spirit be/ unchained...”<sup>4</sup> I bought my first Cash album, the *Unchained* album, and while some of the songs were really good, others I thought could have been left off. But I was really intrigued by Cash’s liner notes, how reflective and backward-looking they were, and written in a certain tight rhythm that I associated with older southern people I’d known, storytellers and purveyors of the past. The accompanying artwork furthered the mood: Cash sat against the weathered wood of an old farm building, and in a hayfield where a low sun made the broomsedge glow. And there he was as a boy in an old black-and-white. He wrote about his father, who rode the rails as a hobo in search of work in the hard years of the thirties, jumping off the slowing train before it reached the depot. He recalled hard labor in the cotton fields as a child, with mule, plow, hoe, and songs to sing. He remembered the excitement of hitch-hiking to Memphis to see the 12 noon Louvin Brothers radio show. He evoked the powerful religion that he encountered at an early age. “The first preachers I heard...in Dyess, Arkansas scared me. The talk about sin and death and eternal hell without redemption, made a mark on me. At four, I’d peep out the window of our farmhouse at night, and if, in the distance, I saw a grass fire or forest fire, I knew hell was almost here.” And he reflected on his mother’s admonitory description of his talent: “My mother used to say, ‘God has his hand on you. Never ignore “the Gift.””<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, I thought in reading these reflections, I wasn’t just fantasizing in linking “The

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<sup>4</sup> Johnny Cash, “Unchained” *Unchained* (American Recordings, 1996)

<sup>5</sup> Johnny Cash, liner notes to *Unchained*

Wanderer” to Flannery O’Connor. Cash did have real-life roots in the world that she evoked in fiction—a rural southern world of poverty, violence, and longings for a mysterious Jesus.

## CHAPTER 1

### MAGIC TO TAKE ME THROUGH THE DARK PLACES

Johnny Cash's death on September 12, 2003 brought forth a host of tributes in a wide variety of press, from the mainstream periodicals (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *People*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*) to the music journals (*Journal of Country Music*, *Rolling Stone*, *Billboard*, *No Depression*, *Sing Out!*, *Spin*); from reflective essays across the political spectrum (*The Nation*, *National Review*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Q*) to interpretations in the religious press (*Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, *First Things*, *Sojourners*, *Touchstone*). The religious periodicals were hardly unique, though, in seeking to make sense of the character of Cash's religion, as that religion had been recurrently put before audiences during a long public life that began in 1956 with his first major hit "I Walk the Line."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Cash's religiosity was a basic theme and object of interest in all of the varied tributes, with Benjamin Hedin writing an essay in *The Nation* called "JC's Resurrection," and Francis Davis describing Cash in *Atlantic Monthly* as "God's Lonely Man."<sup>2</sup> Certainly some of this interest in Cash's religion stemmed from the present context, where religious expressions varied from the vague but omnipresent "God Bless America" to a politicized Neo-Evangelicalism which its opponents characterized as a dangerous "Religious Right." A little over a year after Cash's death, such evangelicals were claimed to be the deciding factor in the 2004 Republican victory, and a widely-circulated cartoon imagined the

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Country Hits* (New York: Billboard, 1996):67. "I Walk the Line" placed #1 on the Country charts beginning June 9, 1956. It also placed at #17 on the Pop charts. Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits* (New York: Billboard, 2004):110. It was Cash's first Country #1, and spent 43 weeks on the Country charts.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Hedin, "JC's Resurrection" *Nation* 278:9 (March 8, 2004):33-36; Francis Davis, "God's Lonely Man" *Atlantic Monthly* 293:2 (March 2004): 141-145

South—the region that Cash lived in for the better part of his life—as a politically insidious “Jesusland.” But it was not just forces extrinsic to Cash that explained the curiosity about his religion. His most current creation at the time of his death, the double album *The Man Comes Around* (released November 2002), began with an ominous, majestic song, Cash’s own, about the second coming of Christ, and the album’s single, his cover of Nine Inch Nails’ “Hurt,” was accompanied by a much-discussed and highly lauded video which drew on imagery of the Last Supper and the crucifixion of Jesus. Something in this music spoke to a significant number of people: the album sold 500,000 copies within six months after its release, then skyrocketed to sales of a million in the ten days after Cash’s death, making it one of only three non-compilation Cash albums to achieve “platinum” status (the others are 1968’s *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* and 1969’s *Johnny Cash at San Quentin*). Meanwhile, the “Hurt” single sold two million copies by the spring of 2003, making it the best-selling single of Cash’s entire career.<sup>3</sup>

That career was long and multi-faceted. Cash was one of *the* major figures in the history of commercial country music, chosen by one of the early (1992) academic assessments of country music as its leading figure, and more recently by Country Music Television as the greatest male performer in the genre, displacing Hank Williams.<sup>4</sup> His music dwelt on a host of themes characteristic of the genre, themes of the dignity of working people, the confining limits and hardships of life, and frustrated longings for love and connection. Of the country performers, Cash was perhaps most deeply marked by a historical sensibility, recurrently evoking the past

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<sup>3</sup> The statistics are those of the Recording Industry Association of America. See [www.riaa.com](http://www.riaa.com). Comparative sales with other singles or albums in Cash’s career are not perfect; modern techniques for recording individual purchases are much more accurate than in the past. Thus, it is probable that a song like “I Walk the Line” sold far more than was recorded. Still, sales of “Hurt” and *The Man Comes Around* were massive and noteworthy.

<sup>4</sup> Melton McLaurin and Richard Peterson, ed. *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1992); [www.cmt.com](http://www.cmt.com)

and especially the historical experiences of working people.<sup>5</sup> He also developed a following in 60s folk circles and with the youth counterculture unparalleled by any other country singer.<sup>6</sup> To such wider audiences, Cash was a country portrayer of the past, presenting, as he phrased it, “voices that weren’t commonly heard at the time—voices that were ignored or even suppressed in the entertainment media, not to mention the political and educational establishments.”<sup>7</sup> Yet Cash’s career also spills outside the form of country music. His early records on Sam Phillips’ Sun label (1955-1958) displayed a distinct sound, one he fashioned with bassist Marshall Grant and electric guitarist Luther Perkins, that is often identified as pioneering rock ‘n’ roll. And, as early as the 1961 B-movie *Five Minutes to Live*, but especially after 1970 and on through the early 90s, Cash was a popular culture figure in such media as the television shows *The Muppets*, *Columbo*, and *Little House on the Prairie*, the mini-series *North and South*, and the films *Murder in Coweta County* and *A Gunfight*.

This project examines simply one facet of Cash’s life and public career, his musical religious expression. I am not claiming that his religiousness was *the* key to who Cash was, either as a person or as a performer, and it’s transparent that much of his music—“I Walk the Line” and “A Boy Named Sue,” for example—has nothing to do with religion. Still, as Benjamin Hedin argued in his reflective 2004 essay in *The Nation*, “no other American songwriter...possessed the sort of obsession, or waged the same struggle, with faith.”<sup>8</sup> “Country star, Christian, rocker, rebel,” *Time*’s cover story began.<sup>9</sup> *Entertainment Weekly* opened with: “Johnny Cash’s soul had been the battlefield for plenty of celebrated skirmishes over the

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<sup>5</sup> Bill Malone, *Country Music USA* (Austin: University of Texas, 2002):284,294; Frederick Danker, “The Repertory and Style of a Country Singer” *Journal of American Folklore* 85:338 (October-December 1972):316,329

<sup>6</sup> Malone, *Country Music* 282,442

<sup>7</sup> Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* (New York: Harper, 1997):263

<sup>8</sup> Hedin, “JC’s Resurrection” *Nation* 36

<sup>9</sup> Richard Corliss, “The Man in Black” *Time* 162:12 (September 22,2003)

decades...drugs or sobriety, rage or peace, God or the other guy.”<sup>10</sup> “According to the old musical formula,” *National Review* began, “if you want to be a master bluesman you sell your soul to the devil—or you can sign on with God and play country. Johnny Cash took the latter path and it’s safe to say he did pretty well with his bargain.”<sup>11</sup> Kris Kristofferson, the remarkable country songwriter and a close personal friend to Cash beginning in 1970, opened a *Rolling Stone* eulogy writing, “Johnny Cash was a biblical character. He was like some old preacher, one of those dangerous old wild ones.”<sup>12</sup> One of Cash’s last interviews, for MTV in August 2003, concluded with him candidly stating, “I expect my life to end pretty soon. You know, I’m 71 years old. I have great faith, though. I have unshakeable faith.”<sup>13</sup>

But what faith exactly? Where can we go from Cash’s statement in his 1997 memoir: “I’m still a Christian, as I have been all my life”?<sup>14</sup> In a historical sense, Christianity *is* the various forms that it takes in different societies, cultures, and eras. Theologians may articulate an ideal Christianity, what it *should* look like, but historically, it exists insofar as groups of people perpetuate and practice it. The different forms of Christianity are its historical face for people in concrete times and places. The imposing cathedrals that dot Europe are emblems of a highly-developed medieval Catholicism, even as the “spirituals” are the hauntingly eloquent expression of Protestant African-Americans trapped in nineteenth-century slavery. As creative and complicated as Cash was, his religion was not *sui generis*. Indeed, in an era when many identify themselves in distance to “organized religion,” perhaps describing themselves as “spiritual” but “not religious,” Cash publicly identified with a particularistic, organized religion, and his funeral was held at the Baptist church close to his home in Hendersonville, Tennessee—the same

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<sup>10</sup> Chris Willman and Anthony DeCurtis, “Johnny Cash” *Entertainment Weekly* 730 (September 26,2003)

<sup>11</sup> Dave Shiflett, “The Unlikely Superstar” *National Review* 55:19 (October 13,2003)

<sup>12</sup> Kris Kristofferson, “Johnny Cash” *Rolling Stone* 946 (April 15,2004)

<sup>13</sup> Kurt Loder, “Johnny Cash: Original Gangsta” [www.mtv.com](http://www.mtv.com)

<sup>14</sup> Cash with Carr, *Cash* 9

institutional structure that as a twelve-year-old in 1944 he had become a member of in a very different era, in the cotton-farming rural community of Dyess, Arkansas.

That's a bit of a clue, but what about the content of that religion? What was the character of the faith that Cash struggled with? In the wake of his death, a number of Neo-Evangelical writers claimed Cash as one of their own, at heart an evangelist, whose missionary purpose was unambiguous and unflagging.<sup>15</sup> In the flagship Neo-Evangelical journal *Christianity Today*, Ted Olson described Cash through the staple Neo-Evangelical theme of embattled cultural persecution.<sup>16</sup> "Against all popular wisdom, [Cash] became a celebrity's celebrity while singing more explicitly about Jesus than many contemporary Christian music favorites." From his first days at Sun in Memphis, Olsen argued, Cash "really was a singer of the gospel," and now, two months after his death, "the Man in Black wears glorious white, reunited with his brother [who preceded him in an early death] and face-to-face with his Lord."<sup>17</sup> In *The Christian Century*, though not a Neo-Evangelical publication, Clifton Black cast Cash in similar unilateral terms: he was "one of the most down-to-earth, effective, missionary evangelists for 'all who have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.'" His music always had "a steady moral core," and his gospel numbers at the famous prison shows had the goal of "inject[ing] some evangelical Christian

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<sup>15</sup> I use the term "Neo-Evangelical" here to characterize the movement that emerged during World War II and has flourished into the present, now representing the most visible face of Christianity in the United States. That movement crosses over denominational lines, and is sustained through such organizational forms as the National Association of Evangelicals (founded 1942), Youth for Christ (founded 1944), InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (British but beginning in the US in 1941), and Campus Crusade for Christ (founded 1951); through the periodical *Christianity Today* (established 1956); through "Christian" bookstores and "contemporary Christian" and "contemporary Christian country" music; and through such schools as Wheaton College and Fuller Theological Seminary. Its most visible representative in the past fifty years has been Billy Graham, who gained wide publicity through mass meetings in 1949 in Los Angeles, and whose Minneapolis-based Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, founded in 1950, is a "virtual empire of communications, publishing, and preaching." Peter Williams, *America's Religions: Traditions and Cultures* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1998):353. Most importantly for my purposes, it involves a certain particular conception of Christianity, circulated and sustained through distinct language and practices. "Neo-Evangelicalism" should not be confused with 18<sup>th</sup> century "evangelical" movements like the Baptists and Methodists, whose ethos shares some similarities but was a distinct historical form.

<sup>16</sup> For the contemporary power of this trope among American Neo-Evangelicals, see Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998)

<sup>17</sup> Ted Olson, "Johnny Cash's Song of Redemption" *Christianity Today* 47:11 (November 2003):60-62



spirituality” into the scene.<sup>18</sup> In the ecumenical journal *Touchstone*, Russell Moore held up Cash as a better model of what Neo-Evangelicals could be, and an exemplar of how to do effective missionary outreach. His candid depictions of guilt, darkness, and judgment resonated with disenchanted youth: “he was able to reach youth culture in a way the rest of us often can’t, precisely because he refused to sugarcoat or ‘market’ the gospel in the ‘language’ of today’s teenagers.”<sup>19</sup>

Steve Turner’s 2004 biography *The Man Called Cash: The Life, Love, and Faith of an American Legend*, published by one of the leading Neo-Evangelical presses (the W Publishing Group/ Thomas Nelson) imagined that “faith” in the Neo-Evangelical vein. Cash was “one of the best-known Christian laymen in America,” Turner argued, “a Christian with traditional evangelical beliefs who was revered by icons of the subculture.” The last chapter, a retrospective interpretation called “Touched by Grace,” depicted Cash as an atypical, unique person informed most basically by Christianity in the Neo-Evangelical mold.<sup>20</sup> Turner quoted Cash referring to his first appearance at a Billy Graham crusade as “the pinnacle of my career,” used Neo-Evangelical tropes like cultural persecution and the duty of personal evangelizing to frame episodes in Cash’s life, and consistently referenced the Bible as a self-interpreting, timeless text that informed Cash throughout his life.<sup>21</sup>

Turner, Moore, Black, and Olson are not pulling their interpretation of Cash out of thin air. As Turner notes, Cash did appear at a Billy Graham “crusade” in May 1970, in Knoxville, Tennessee, and he was to reappear regularly at Graham’s crusades throughout the 70s and then,

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<sup>18</sup> C. Clifton Black, “Requiem for The Man in Black,” *Christian Century* 120:20 (Oct 4, 2003):8-9

<sup>19</sup> Russell Moore, “Real Hard Cash,” *Touchstone* 18:10 (December 2005):18-19

<sup>20</sup> Steve Turner, *The Man Called Cash: The Life, Love, and Faith of an American Legend* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2004):187, 230.

<sup>21</sup> Turner, 142 (statement about Graham), 140-141 (example of cultural persecution), 231 (example of personal evangelism), 228-229 (example of self-interpreting biblical message)

with less regularity, in the 80s and 90s.<sup>22</sup> On his own network television variety show, *The Johnny Cash Show*, Cash pushed for a special show featuring gospel music, and in the spring of 1971 viewers could see, along with the moving singing of Mahalia Jackson and the Staples Singers, Cash performing a duet with Billy Graham. It was Cash's own composition, called "The Preacher Said, 'Jesus Said'", and it featured a give-and-take between Cash singing and Graham reading passages from the New Testament.<sup>23</sup> Off the stage, Cash and Graham forged a personal friendship, and they visited each other and talked regularly—though infrequently due to their different busy lifestyles—until the end of Cash's life.

Beyond just his association with Graham, though, Cash clearly and publicly identified with Neo-Evangelicalism in the 1970s. In 1971 his joining of the small Assembly of God church Evangel Temple (in the Nashville suburbs) was widely-publicized in country music circles. Founded by Jimmy Snow (son of country singer Hank Snow) in 1967, the church was explicitly aimed at people in the country music scene, and for a time included Larry Gatlin and Kris Kristofferson, along with Cash and his wife June Carter.<sup>24</sup> Cash never claimed to have the characteristic Pentecostal experience of "speaking in tongues," but his public statements until 1977, when he stopped attending Evangel Temple, reflected the Pentecostal ethos of dividing the world into "saints" and "sinners," and the idea that idle, personal vices like drinking alcohol and cussing were the principal sins.<sup>25</sup> To even greater publicity, a *Life* cover story, Cash in the summer of 1972 appeared at a large Neo-Evangelical rally in Dallas. Organized by Campus Crusade for Christ, "Explo '72" featured the preaching of Billy Graham and the singing and personal testifying of Cash, who closed the four-day event with a concert attended by 150,000. "I

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<sup>22</sup> *Music City News* 7:2 (May 1970):1

<sup>23</sup> *Johnny Cash Show* #53. The song also appeared on the 1971 album *Man in Black*.

<sup>24</sup> *Music City News* 4:4 (October 1967):11; Turner, *Man Called Cash* 144-149

<sup>25</sup> Turner, *Man Called Cash* 163. For a brief time afterwards, 1978-1979, he attended a different small Pentecostal church pastored by John Cobaugh.

have tried drugs and a little of everything else,” Cash told the overwhelmingly young audience, “and there is nothing more soul-satisfying than having the kingdom of God building inside you and growing.”<sup>26</sup> From Explo ’72 on into the next several years, Cash became a regular performer at mass meetings hosted by Neo-Evangelical groups like Campus Crusade and Youth for Christ and independent Neo-Evangelical preachers Graham, James Robison, Oral Roberts, and Rex Humbard.<sup>27</sup> Cash contributed laudatory forewords to James Robison’s 1976 *America: Garden of the Gods* and Jimmy Snow’s 1977 *I Cannot Go Back*, even as, in those years (74-77), outside the public eye, he and June Carter took correspondence courses in the Bible from the Phoenix-based Christian International Bible College.<sup>28</sup>

In his 1973 book *The New Johnny Cash*, Pentecostal writer Charles Paul Conn focused on Cash’s joining of Evangel Temple in 1971 and argued:

there are those around Cash, including those who know him best, who will tell you that Cash has not changed at all, that at heart he has always been a deeply religious person, and his ‘change’ over the past few years has been merely a return to what has always been basic and essential to him. Perhaps they are right. But the vibrations that he sends out when he talks and sings today testify to something of much greater substance than merely the personality of a good and decent man. They speak of personal, vibrant acquaintance with a living Christ, and of a single-minded absorption in the work of His kingdom. That is the *new* Johnny Cash.<sup>29</sup>

From Cash’s story Conn derived an evangelistic summons. “If your life is empty, Jesus Christ can fill it...Like Cash, you can know Jesus Christ personally, so that He becomes an exciting, powerful presence in your life. And when that happens, when you come to know Him for yourself, you will experience the same newness of life that this man in black has found.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Life* 72:25 (June 30, 1972): 43

<sup>27</sup> Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975):180-181; Cash with Carr, *Cash* 301

<sup>28</sup> James Robison, *America: Garden of the Gods* (Atlanta: CrossRoads, 1976); Jimmy Snow, *I Cannot Go Back* (Plainfield: Logos International, 1977); Johnny Cash, *Man in White* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986):4-5

<sup>29</sup> Charles Paul Conn, *The New Johnny Cash* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1973):12

<sup>30</sup> Conn 91,93

Two years later, for the Neo-Evangelical publishing company Zondervan, Cash wrote his own autobiography or “spiritual odyssey,” *Man in Black*.<sup>31</sup> Like Conn he ascribed great significance to joining Evangel Temple. “I felt brand-new, born again,” he wrote, “as I knelt quietly at the altar with the other people who had come, and I left the church feeling awfully good that night, feeling joy and relief at having made my decision.”<sup>32</sup> The book jacket billed Cash as “God’s superstar,” and in 1976 a Spire Christian Comic featured Cash as a model of the triumphal, past-erasing experience of being “born again” that the Neo-Evangelicals imagined. In his 1977 *Country: the Biggest Music in America*, journalist Nick Tosches could single out Cash for special disdain. “There are several offensively pious men in country music,” Tosches sniffed. “Johnny Cash and his God are a particularly tedious act. The strongest drink Cash serves at his parties is nonalcoholic fruit punch...Each year, Johnny Cash’s mind seems to grow more monomaniacal. His 1976 hit ‘Sold Out of Flagpoles’ is an absurd mess of godly patriotism, a song berserk with blandness and as dumb as any in the 1975 film Nashville.”<sup>33</sup> He also reprinted a page from the Spire comic to show the juvenile character of Cash’s religion.

The spirit of this Neo-Evangelicalism was forward-looking and past-forgetting, or, historian Martin Marty argues, deeply ahistorical in its self-understanding. In a tersely provocative assessment, Marty describes Neo-Evangelicalism as “the characteristic Protestant...way of relating to modernity.” In eras of confusing flux, where the old patterns begin to seem foreign and people are plagued by anomic questions like “‘Who am I?’ and ‘To whom do I belong?’,” evangelicals present a community of feeling marked by shared pietistic experiences, a vocabulary of code words and phrases that signify one’s membership, and a perspicacious Bible that teaches an unambiguous morality and provides clear orientation in life.

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<sup>31</sup> Cash, *Man in Black* preface

<sup>32</sup> Cash, *Man in Black* 19

<sup>33</sup> Nick Tosches, *Country: The Biggest Music in America* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977): 133

“Evangelicals are the pioneer religious moderns,” Marty writes, “with their pietist *ecclesiola in ecclesia*—the chosen little church inside the given great big surrounding one—as a model. They still [1981] remain in the avant-garde in the electronic age as they adopt the most rigorous secular advertising and entertainment styles.”<sup>34</sup>

This form of Christianity had considerable appeal to numbers of people in the post-World War II era, and in the present it is the most visible face of Christianity. In the 1970s it drew a variety of unlikely converts: Watergate conspirator Charles Colson, Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, and 60s icon Bob Dylan. Colson, who had once said that he would “walk over my grandmother if necessary” to elect Richard Nixon, emerged from prison in 1976 with the Neo-Evangelical personal account *Born Again*.<sup>35</sup> Cleaver’s 1978 *Soul on Fire* recounted his own “born again” experience, and repudiated the violent spirit and commendation towards rape in his decade-earlier *Soul on Ice*. Bob Dylan, to the amazement of many of his core listeners, sang of his own new (and brief) Neo-Evangelicalism on his 1979 album *Slow Train Coming*, and for a time preached sermons at concerts and refused to play old songs that were “of the Devil.”

Cash’s own fervent Neo-Evangelicalism in the 1970s was thus not unique in the culture. What did distinguish Cash from Colson (formerly a non-practicing Episcopalian from Massachusetts), Cleaver (an adult atheist who grew up in Arizona and California), and Dylan (raised Jewish in Minnesota) was his own sense that—contrary to what Conn argued—his Neo-Evangelicalism was actually a reaffirmation of a faith that he had absorbed in his youth, in rural Arkansas in the first eighteen years of his life (1932-1950). In *Man in Black* he recalled joining the Baptist church when he was twelve thus: “The stand I would take in 1971 at Evangel Temple in Nashville, twenty-seven years later, and the changes that would come about then would be a

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<sup>34</sup> Martin Marty, “The Revival of Evangelicalism and Southern Religion” in David Harrell, ed. *Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism* (Macon: Mercer University, 1981):9,18,15

<sup>35</sup> Charles Colson, *Born Again* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1976):71

restoration of the joy of my salvation that I had experienced at age twelve.”<sup>36</sup> The narrative of *Man in Black* was actually framed as a return, and on its last page was a strange story of Cash flying over the exact spot in Arkansas where his brother Jack was buried. The plane hit a bump, shaking badly, and Cash looked out the window to see Jack’s grave. To his brother, who died at age 14 in 1944, Cash whispered, “I’m still singing those hymns you and I loved so much.”<sup>37</sup> In a 1973 interview for *Country Music Magazine*, Cash was asked “when religion became important in your life,” and he concluded a response by saying, “My religion now is no different than it was when I was a kid, it’s just that after a few years of adult life, I went down the wayward path.”<sup>38</sup> In 1975 a *Penthouse* interviewer asked, “What finally caused you to give up drugs?” Cash said, “God. The times when I was so down and out of it were also the times when I felt the presence of God...I’m not playing church now. I was brought up in the church when I was a boy, and I didn’t play church then.”<sup>39</sup>

Cash thus invoked a religious past preceding the “new,” Neo-Evangelical Johnny Cash that emerged in 1970-71. In the late 70s that Neo-Evangelical affiliation declined dramatically, with the exception of a continuing friendship with and public support for Billy Graham. Yet, as the 1997 memoir and 2003 interview noted, Cash continued after the Neo-Evangelical 70s to affirm a persisting and heartfelt Christianity. What was its form? In the wake of Cash’s death, a number of interpreters lauded the difference of the religion that they saw in Cash, one that breathed a ethos distinct from the dominant Neo-Evangelicalism of the present, and several, like Cash himself, reached into the more distant past to make sense of it. In *First Things* theologian

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<sup>36</sup> Cash, *Man in Black* 19

<sup>37</sup> *Man in Black* 182

<sup>38</sup> Peter McCabe and Jack Killion, “Interview with Johnny Cash” *Country Music* May 1973 in Michael Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire: The Johnny Cash Reader* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2002):132

<sup>39</sup> Larry Linderman, “*Penthouse* Interview: Johnny Cash” *Penthouse* August 1975 in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 151

Peter Candler honored Cash as a complicated other to a “deeply counterfeit culture—particularly a counterfeit Christianity.” While Neo-Evangelicals went along with the larger culture in lionizing youth and pushing the darker elements of life into invisibility, Cash in his art unsentimentally sang of pain and despair, and the video for “Hurt” demonstrated an engagement with mortality and loss with few parallels in popular culture.<sup>40</sup> Rosanne Cash, Johnny’s oldest daughter and a gifted singer and songwriter who embarked on her own career in the late 1970s, described her father in a public memorial as “a Baptist with the soul of a mystic. He was a poet who worked in the dirt.”<sup>41</sup> In *Atlantic Monthly* Francis Davis called Cash “God’s lonely man,” and in a present [2004] context of politicized Neo-Evangelicalism, denunciatory finger-pointing from various sides, and a resurgent religious nationalism, he longed for a figure like Cash who “was a Christian who didn’t cast stones, a patriot who didn’t play the flag card.”<sup>42</sup>

In the *New York Times* Nicholas Kulish traced Cash’s “journey through the other side of virtue,” and like Davis wished for the complexity of a Cash “in a world increasingly reduced to good and evil...[to] reductive thinking that makes it easy to reduce swaths of the country to color codes and political parties; to lock millions away in jails and prisons, then toss the keys without guilt.” Cash brought to the stage both his demons and his angels, and this gave his music “its depth and profundity.” Furthermore, Kulish argued, “Cash’s life was an American story that can never be repeated, one that began in the Depression-era cotton fields of Arkansas” and traveled through post-war Germany and the beginnings of rock-n-roll.<sup>43</sup> In *The Nation* Benjamin Hedin claimed that Cash’s majestic “The Man Comes Around” was “arguably his greatest original song,” a work of both art and faith. “The context surrounding this faith,” Hedin argued, became

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Candler, “Johnny of the Cross” *First Things* 138 (December 2003):6-9

<sup>41</sup> Rosanne Cash, “My Dad Johnny Cash” in Jason Fine, ed. *Cash* (New York: Crown, 2004):13

<sup>42</sup> Davis, “God’s Lonely Man” 141-145

<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Kulish, “Johnny Cash’s Journey Through the Other Side of Virtue” *New York Times* (November 27, 2005) sec4 p9

clear in the posthumously-released *My Mother's Hymn Book*, an album of old gospel songs that Cash had learned as a boy from his mother Carrie, and that he recorded in the 1990s with the accompaniment of simply his own guitar. In fact Cash recorded *Hymn Book* in a makeshift recording studio set up in a log cabin in the woods on his Tennessee property, and the setting was apt. In singing these old gospel songs Cash was on more than just a nostalgic trip. He “arrived at the earliest music of his childhood,” Hedin argued, and used it to express his own faith in the fading years of his life.<sup>44</sup> In the liner notes he prepared in the summer of 2003, Cash wrote that “the songs in that old book mean more to me than I can tell you,” and in an accompanying interview he described them as “powerful songs...my magic to take me through the dark places.”<sup>45</sup>

These were statements of the persistence of tradition, of finding present meaning in cultural material inherited from the past. This affirmation of tradition was not of the spirit of Neo-Evangelicalism, a form that, as Marty argues, is radically modernist in its history-less immediate belonging and resolute forward-looking direction. Indeed, as argued above, even in his fervent Neo-Evangelical years, Cash took long backward glances at his religious past, one that had meaning and power for him long before the 70s, which he could recall in the *Unchained* liner notes and to whose songs he could return late in life. What do we know of the sensibility of that older religious world, the one that “made a mark” on Cash in his youth in the 30s and 40s?

One turns to the existing historical literature on religious life in the twilight decades of the New South and is quickly puzzled. At the most basic level, the literature divides religious life and sensibility sharply along the color line, with the model of a white “southern religion” and “the black church.” Yet throughout his career, even in the primarily white genre of country

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<sup>44</sup> Hedin, “JC’s Resurrection” 33-36

<sup>45</sup> Johnny Cash, liner notes to *Unearthed* American Recordings, 2004 (booklet 83-84)



music, Cash sang songs often characterized as from the (separate) black tradition: “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?,” a staple of his concerts in the 60s, “Strange Things Happening Every Day” and “Don’t Take Everybody for Your Friend” on a 1979 album, and “God’s Gonna Cut You Down” in the 2002-2003 sessions that became a posthumous album. In liner notes and interviews, Cash explained that he learned these songs in his youth, from the radio performances of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a black Pentecostal evangelist, and the Golden Gate Quartet, a black gospel group that recorded a variety of older folk material in the 30s and 40s.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Cash, pillar of country music, singled out Tharpe as his lifelong favorite singer, and in *Man in Black* he described his excitement at seeing a show of hers in the 60s.<sup>47</sup> Maybe he was an aberration in his youthful exposure to and absorption of such music—or perhaps at the ground level more exchanges were happening across the color line than scholars have imagined.

In fact the most careful historian of religion in the New South, Paul Harvey, has argued this point, though it challenges some forty years of accumulated scholarship. In his creative 2005 synthesis *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War Through the Civil Rights Era* Harvey argues that the regional bourgeoisie—whites and blacks who lived in the towns and cities and embodied what Edward Ayers has called “the promise of the New South”—did share basic aspects of a religious ethos of respectability, idleness-shunning morality, ordered worship practices, and rationalized, efficient professionalization. Such ideals crossed denominational lines and were central to the strivings of white and black bourgeois Protestants (overwhelmingly Baptist and Methodist) to distance their institutions from their “folk” origins—and from the persisting “folk” practices of the rural masses of both races. Harvey

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<sup>46</sup> Johnny Cash, liner notes to *Believe in Him* Word, 1986; Johnny Cash, liner notes to *American Recordings* American Recordings, 1994; Cash with Carr, *Cash* 68; Johnny Cash, liner notes to *Unearthed* (booklet 89)

<sup>47</sup> Bill Flanagan, “Johnny Cash, American” *Musician* May 1988; Turner, *Man Called Cash* 238; *Man in Black* 69-70; Cash with Carr, *Cash* 267

notes that Lillian Smith, hardly one to sugarcoat racial realities in the region, wrote to Fisk sociologist Charles Johnson in 1955 of a rural white church near her home in Rabun County, Georgia. “It is officially a white church. But they invite the Negro Baptists—over in the valley—to come very often to their church; and they go to the Negro Baptist church. I mean by ‘they’: the entire congregation. Both Baptist rural groups (white and Negro) use my swimming pool for their baptisms. Last summer, the white group invited the Negro group to witness the baptism service. There were white and colored rural Baptists roaming all around my place.”<sup>48</sup> Harvey goes on to argue that the rural masses, white and black, shared some of the very “folk” practices that the bourgeois class of their own race sought distance from: emotional displays of ecstasy, mystical stories of initiation, preachers who lacked any formal training and instead claimed sanction from a mysterious “call,” and an unpolished but deceptively simple body of song.<sup>49</sup>

Historians of the New South know, as Smith did, that race relations were hardly rosy, but perhaps, as Harvey’s argument and his sketch in chapter 3 of his book suggest, there were some more complicated dynamics going on than either the scholarship on the New South or on its religious life have imagined—a layer of “folk” religion that crossed the color line and was the distinct property of the rural masses of the region. Charles Reagan Wilson argued in a 1991 essay on William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor, perhaps the two most gifted literary portrayers of the New South, that “Faulkner’s and O’Connor’s religious sympathies are with those embodying a simple folk religion, more than with those in the comfortable mainstream town churches.” Both saw town churches as “embodying the complacency and self-centeredness of the modern world, but those complacent churches do not exhaust the meaning of religion in

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<sup>48</sup> 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, 2005):111

<sup>49</sup> Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming* 114-126; 148-166

the South.” Beneath the town churches was, Wilson suggested based on Faulkner and O’Connor, a strata of “folk religion,” that of “the plain folk, the poor whites and blacks.”<sup>50</sup>

But such town churches, those of the New South bourgeoisie, do almost entirely exhaust the historical scholarship on religion in the New South. One turns to the footnotes in the historiography of the past forty years and finds that the source materials are those generated by the regional bourgeoisie, white or black. This reveals a major obstacle to one perennial approach to the study of religious history, that of employing the denominational model. From his own statements and from the memories of friends who grew up with him, we know that Cash attended all the churches in the Dyess community—Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, and Assembly of God—even though he joined only one, the Baptist.<sup>51</sup> (In fact this was the regular custom of rural people, as chapters 2 and 3 will demonstrate). Those local churches left no records, but the denominations they identified with did. Such denominational materials—proceedings of annual meetings like the Southern Baptist Convention, official denominational newspapers like *Religious Herald*, books by prominent denominational leaders—reveal, as historians like Paul Harvey and Evelyn Higginbotham have noted, a heavy bourgeois imprint, impulses to both differentiate themselves from the “folk” and to “uplift” them from their retrograde condition by “encouraging[ing] the practices of respectable churches.”<sup>52</sup> Unless read with a heavy critical spirit, such denominational sources of the bourgeoisie will not tell us much about the ethos and sensibility of local churches, those, Wilson argued, that were home to the “poor whites and blacks.”

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “William Faulkner and the Southern Religious Culture” in Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1995):62

<sup>51</sup> *Man in Black* 8-10,17-31; author interviews with A.J. Henson, Bartlett, Tennessee (January 9, 2006), J.E. Huff, Dyess, Arkansas (January 10, 2006)

<sup>52</sup> Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming* 114-115

Even a work like Ted Ownby's creative cultural history *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South 1865-1920* is, despite its title, not a study of the rural masses but rather of small townspeople or wealthy rural people who, in social life and cultural sensibility, were connected to the emergent towns. Places like Greenwood, Mississippi and Anderson, South Carolina (from whose churches Ownby uses records) may seem small or "rural" today, but in the context of the New South they were "urban," home to merchants, shopkeepers, and landowners who had left the countryside. Furthermore, Ownby's "rural" people have the cultural power to make theirs the "accepted morality of the region" and the political clout to successfully pass innovative legislation to prohibit alcohol, curb profanity, and regulate hunting.<sup>53</sup> Such "rural" people are not the poor whites and blacks who, Morgan Kousser has demonstrated, were both stripped of the franchise in the 1890s, before the legislative reforms that Ownby describes, and whose socioeconomic and cultural position became increasingly unenviable. "To be 'country'," Edward Ayers writes of the emergent New South culture, "was to be outside the currents of modern history, to be backward, ludicrous...rural dwellers confronted confident, often arrogant, town and city dwellers."<sup>54</sup>

Ayers was describing new cultural categories of the Gilded Age, but, as Ayers and C. Vann Woodward before him argued, the New South order that emerged in the late nineteenth century persisted until the mid-twentieth century. In 1940, on the brink of a decade of macroeconomic change in the South, 41% of the regional population was still classified in the "farm" category of the occupational Census.<sup>55</sup> Liston Pope's extensive 1938-39 study of Gaston

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<sup>53</sup> Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1990):128

<sup>54</sup> J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974):224-265; Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University, 1992):187-213

<sup>55</sup> I compiled statistics from the Census as gathered on [fisher.lib.Virginia.edu](http://fisher.lib.Virginia.edu)

County, North Carolina, *Millhands and Preachers*, argued for a stratified society of three social classes and types of churches: “rural,” “mill,” and “uptown.”<sup>56</sup> Mill workers, the region’s largest industrial group, drew a much better income than rural people, and Pope found that among mill workers “the ‘country yokel’” was “an object of ridicule and humor.”<sup>57</sup> More numerically typical of regional patterns was the uptown/rural division. In his 1947-48 fieldwork in Alabama’s cotton-growing Wilcox County, Morton Rubin noted of white small farmers in a rural village that “outsiders characterize them all in similar fashion...My middle class [Pope’s “uptown”] friends in Plantation Town [Camden, the county seat] warned me about ‘getting mixed up with those wild people.’”<sup>58</sup>

Rubin included an anecdote about the Branchley family that reveals the persistence of New South cultural categories even in the face of structural change. The Branchleys were country people who had moved to town and were finding their own small piece of post-war prosperity. Mr. Branchley worked as a “back yard mechanic,” and the family had bought an “old plantation-style house” that they remodeled. “The Branchleys are middle class by virtue of their income, housing, and general integrity”—yet they were marked as lower class because they continued to belong to a rural church. “The Branchleys do not belong to one of the local churches; they say there is too much emphasis on dress and form in the church in town. Mr. Branchley’s sister is a member and founder of a sect which meets in the country. Mrs. Branchley says this group has ‘real religion’ since they concern themselves with teaching about God rather than with ‘show.’” Thus, though “people can rise in Plantation County society if they strive for

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<sup>56</sup> Liston Pope, *Millhands and Preachers: A Study of Gastonia* (New Haven: Yale University, 1942):49-69

<sup>57</sup> Pope 55

<sup>58</sup> Morton Rubin, *Plantation County* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1951):53

leadership in the church and in community affairs...families like Branchleys who remain aloof from community affairs are called 'honest folks who'll never get ahead.'"<sup>59</sup>

In their 1947 report *The Church and Rural Community Living in the South*, the Southern Rural Life Council (an interracial group centered in the Nashville universities) concluded that "we find two kinds of religion which draw their members from different social levels...The religion of the poor, of the outcast, and the oppressed tends to become an other-worldly escape from the difficulties of daily life, and the religion of the respectable, the well-to-do middle class, tends to become a benediction upon the status quo."<sup>60</sup> Subsequent analysis (chapters 3 and 4) will show that this cliché of "otherworldliness" needs to be read critically, but that analysis will also support the Council's idea of "two kinds of religion" throughout the New South era.

It was of course from the ranks of such poor rural people that Cash and many of the major figures in country music came: his parents were former sharecroppers who struggled, in the years of his youth, to acquire title to a small farm through a Farm Security Administration loan. An anecdote that Cash told to his first serious biographer, Christopher Wren, captures some of the dynamics of the rural/urban cultural context. It was 1955 and the social order of the New South was unmistakably fading, with an infusion of capital into the region and the exodus of rural people from the farms to the towns and cities of postwar America. Cash was one of these. After four years in the Air Force in Germany (1950-1954), he did not return to the Arkansas cotton patch but rather settled in burgeoning Memphis, finding work as an appliance salesman. With two automobile mechanics, Luther Perkins and Marshall Grant, both migrants from the farm to the city, he formed a band that played "hillbilly" music, as country was then called. When their first single with Sun Records, "Cry, Cry, Cry"/ "Hey Porter" began to sell well in

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<sup>59</sup> Rubin 120

<sup>60</sup> Southern Rural Life Council, *The Church and Rural Community Living in the South* (Nashville: Southern Rural Life Council, 1947):21

local markets, Cash started driving throughout the Memphis environs trying to set up concert dates. In the small town of Joiner, Arkansas, not too far from the Dyess community in which he had grown up, he encountered cultural prejudices fashioned in the (fading) New South society. “There was one theater in Joiner, Arkansas,” he recalled. “I told the owner who I was and that I had a record out on Sun and would like to try to get the theater booked for a personal appearance for myself there. He looked at me and said, “I don’t want any goddamn hillbillies in my theater.’ I never forgot that.”<sup>61</sup>

The religious analogue to this kind of scene remains distinctly opaque. Ayers, Pope, and Rubin have told us that there was substantial cultural differentiation between urban and rural people in the New South, Harvey has given a brief, suggestive sketch of “folk” practices of the rural masses that the bourgeoisie tried to reform, and Wilson has used two much-lauded writers to argue for the presence of a stratum of religion that circulated among “poor whites and blacks.” If historians have not, a variety of outsiders have searched out this stratum of religion. Flannery O’Connor, as Wilson indicated, continually focused her rich fiction (1952-1964) on the complex religious longings of poorer people in the region she called “Christ-haunted,” and her first novel, 1952’s *Wise Blood*, centered on a migrant from the farm who could have been a variant of a young Johnny Cash in the early 50s. Hazel Motes was another man in black, dressed like an old country preacher even as he fled the vanishing rural community of Eastrod through four years in the army and on to a strange mission in a southern city, haunted by the memory of his preacher grandfather and obsessed by the image of a Jesus who he saw “move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark.”<sup>62</sup> Psychiatrist Robert Coles sought out the types of people that Flannery O’Connor’s fiction had

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<sup>61</sup> Christopher Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too: The Life of Johnny Cash* (New York: Ballantine, 1971):97-98

<sup>62</sup> Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood* (1952) in Fitzgerald, ed. *Collected Works* (1988):11

opened up to him, and on the heels of his acclaimed 1967 *Children of Crisis*, he wrote of *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers*, concluding with a remarkable chapter on “Rural Religion” (also published as an essay, “God and the Rural Poor”).<sup>63</sup>

The 2000 film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* imagined Homer’s *Odyssey* into the New South, and its soundtrack that leaned heavily on old “folk” religious songs like “Lonesome Valley” and “O Death” infused the story with Christian meanings. The 2005 art house documentary *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* pursued the trail of an older, rural South whose legacies still made themselves felt in rich musical religious expression and storytelling. Tom Rankin’s beautiful 1993 book *Sacred Space* displayed photographs of black churches established in the New South era, and he sought to capture their continued meaning and power for their members in the still-quiet rural and poor Mississippi Delta. Dust-to-Digital’s 2003 6-CD boxed set *Goodbye, Babylon* brought together a host of “folk” religious songs generated in the New South era, and its packaging in a plain pine box with cotton stuffings evoked traces of the real-world context in which that music was created. Indeed, many of the songs on *Goodbye, Babylon* came from the exact musicians that Cash listened to as a boy on the family’s Sears Roebuck radio—the “hillbilly” performers the Carter Family, the Louvin Brothers, the Browns Ferry Four, the Bailes Brothers, and the Chuck Wagon Gang; the “race” musicians Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Mahalia Jackson, and the Golden Gate Quartet. This was participatory listening, though, quite different from the (probable) experience of the modern listener: Cash further absorbed such songs by singing them in the churches of the Dyess community, and in the fields where he labored with his family to grow the cotton which, to the contemporary purchaser of *Goodbye, Babylon*, may seem like an exotic timepiece.

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Coles, *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers: Volume II of Children of Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971)



Yet a historical monograph examining this world and interpreting it in light of what historians know about the New South context remains unwritten. To pursue and reconstruct the context of the religion that Cash experienced in his youth, that he continued to identify with until the time of his death, and which a number of critics have heard in the music he created in his long career, is to open up precisely the strata of poor people's New South religion that has intrigued writers, psychiatrists, folklorists, photographers, filmmakers, and music listeners, but has remained opaque to historians. The rural poor of the New South were culturally and economically marginalized, but they were not a tiny minority who found religious identity in fringe "sects."<sup>64</sup> Introducing the 1939 Federal Writers' Project collection *These Are Our Lives*, W.T. Couch judged the rural poor population—small farmers, tenants and sharecroppers, agricultural wage laborers—to constitute perhaps a third of the regional population, at some thirteen to sixteen million out of a total of 39 million.<sup>65</sup> The remarkable body of artistic documentation from Farm Security Administration photographers in the late 30s and early 40s shows the local, institutional character of the rural poor's religion, one articulated in innumerable plain wooden churches throughout the southern countryside. Those photographs also show,

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<sup>64</sup> This is the consistent argument of David Harrell, in "The Sectional Origins of the Churches of Christ" (1964), *White Sects and Black Men* (1971), "The South: Seedbed of Sectarianism" (1981), "Religious Pluralism: Catholics, Jews, and Sectarians" (1985), "The Evolution of Plain-Folk Religion in the South 1835-1920" (1988). Wayne Flynt has argued that in their religion the poor of the New South found a psychological coping mechanism. See "One in the Spirit, Many in the Flesh: Southern Evangelicals" (1981), "Southern Baptists: Rural to Urban Transition" (1981), "Religion for the Blues: Evangelicalism, Poor Whites, and the Great Depression" (2005). Chapter 2 presents extensive disagreements with Harrell and Flynt.

<sup>65</sup> W.T. Couch, ed. *These Are Our Lives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1939):xiv-xix. Couch judged the families of landlords to constitute about 500,000 people. By South I mean Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. Except for Louisiana, whose southern half was overwhelmingly Catholic, these 14 states are differentiated from all others in the United States by having Baptists and Methodists constitute over 50% of members of religious bodies. See Howard Odun's map in *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1936):140. Mill workers are outside the scope of my study. They have received fairly significant study, from Liston Pope's 1942 *Millhands and Preachers*, to John Kenneth Morland's 1958 *Millways of Kent* and Hylan Lewis's 1955 *Blackways of Kent*, to the 1976 sociological study *Spindles and Spires: A Re-Study of Religion and Social Change in Gastonia* and the 1987 collective study *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*. In his classic and foundational work, one based on extensive fieldwork, Pope argued that quantitative and qualitative factors created three different categories of churches in the New South: "the rural church," "the mill church," and "the uptown church." Pope, *Millhands and Preachers* 70-95

Colleen McDannell argues, “the complexity of rural faith,” and thus, though the institutional religion of rural people may seem simple and homogenous on the surface—of rural church members some 54% were Baptist and 30% were Methodist, with some 6% Church of Christ or Disciples of Christ, 3.5% Presbyterian, and 1% Pentecostal—it deserves much greater examination than it has received.<sup>66</sup>

This is a study, then, in cultural persistence and the power of inherited tradition, or how a complex religious sensibility that Cash absorbed in his youth of rural poverty in the 30s and 40s could continue to inform him long after the context of its initial absorption was gone, as he personally appropriated it in adult life and sought to imagine it into the music he put before the public. Though this project spans the entirety of Cash’s life and career, it is not a biography or comprehensive narrative interpretation of his life and music. Those wanting a biography should consult Michael Streissguth’s nuanced 2006 portrait *Johnny Cash: The Biography*. Nor is this a comprehensive study of all of Cash’s religious identification. I am interested in the principal themes that endured throughout his life, and most basically in how the religion of his youth was manifest in the music he created. Jack Shaw, a minister who got to know Cash in 1981 and became a close friend and confidant for the rest of Cash’s life, even traveling with him on the road in the 90s, reflected after Cash’s death that “the purpose of his life—I know that *he* knew—was music. It was artistic ability and writing. And religion was the mainspring. His faith in God was the essential part of it all, [along with] his mother’s strong faith and his prayers.”<sup>67</sup> Few, whether their taste inclines them towards Cash, would disagree that music was the foundation of

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<sup>66</sup> Colleen McDannell, *Picturing Faith: Photography and the Great Depression* (New Haven: Yale University, 2004):89; I calculated membership statistics from the 1926 *Census of Religious Bodies*. These statistics are by no means infallible, based as they were on churches’ own voluntary reporting, but they do suggest some of the general outlines of institutional religious life in the countryside. See United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Religious Bodies: 1926 Volumes 1 and 2* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1930).

<sup>67</sup> Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash: The Biography* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2006):252

the well-known public figure that Cash became. Thus I focus on Cash's religious expression in music—and that is also the reason why I don't spend significant time on his Neo-Evangelical affiliation in the 70s. While that was a part of him and one that will require some subsequent mention, it produced no notable music. His 1973 composition "Matthew 24 (Is Knocking at the Door)" does show an education in the ideas of premillennial dispensationalism (one that Bob Dylan also learned in his Neo-Evangelical years), and his 1974 composition "Billy and Rex and Oral and Bob" offers a laudatory portrait of prominent Neo-Evangelical figures. Both songs are known only to the most diehard of Cash fans, having appeared on mediocre, unsuccessful albums that peaked at #32 and #48 on the Country charts.<sup>68</sup> Cash's music that did find public resonance, by contrast, shows no discernible Neo-Evangelical imprint, but instead, I will argue in the chapters that follow, the powerful stamp of an older form of Christianity, one fashioned in the New South and which Cash himself explicitly paid tribute to in the songs on *My Mother's Hymn Book*. That said, anyone wanting a rival argument, one that interprets Cash's religion entirely through the categories of the Neo-Evangelicalism with which he associated in the 70s, should turn to Steve Turner's 2004 biography *The Man Called Cash*.

There are some obvious issues in using Cash's music as a point of entry into uncovering a stratum of complex, poor people's religious life in the New South. That music was both a commercial product and an indirect, mediated form of communication. Simon Frith argues that "what is available to us...is a result of decision made in production, made by musicians, entrepreneurs, and corporate bureaucrats, made according to governments' and lawyers' rulings, in response to technological opportunities."<sup>69</sup> David Sanjek concurs, arguing that it is a romantic illusion to believe that in mediated music, even that recorded in the 1920s with primitive

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<sup>68</sup> Joel Whitburn, *Top Country Albums 1964-1997* (Menomonee Falls: Record Research, 1997):30

<sup>69</sup> Simon Frith, *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (New York: Routledge, 1988):6-7

technology and minimal financial remuneration to the musician, we are getting “undiluted access to self-expression.”<sup>70</sup> More pointedly, looking to the origins of the genre of country music, James Cobb argues that the musical form was an amalgam from the beginning, drawing from such popular sources as ragtime and parlor music, and that is simply fictive to imagine the music as the “pure, unadulterated reflection of the life experiences of rural southern whites.”<sup>71</sup>

We can see these issues in succinct form in Cash’s first attempts at recording in 1954-55, when he was still a rural migrant trying to move out of being an appliance salesman (a profession for which he was ill-suited) and into making it as a full-time musician and performer. He approached Sam Phillips at the small, three-room Sun Records office in Memphis with the hope of putting on record what he, Luther Perkins, and Marshall Grant were then performing in a fifteen minute slot on local radio. Alone with his guitar, he premiered his own gospel composition “Belshazzar,” which he had written while in the Air Force, and he told Phillips he wanted to be a gospel singer. Phillips balked: though hillbilly gospel songs reached a high point of sales in the late 40s and early 50s, a small regional company like Sun could not make a profit on the recording of gospel music, and Phillips told Cash to come back with some non-gospel material.<sup>72</sup> Cash returned, with Perkins and Grant, and a rollicking train song, “Hey Porter,” that he had also composed in the Air Force. Phillips liked the song but not the others that the troupe played for him, and he told Cash that he thought the upbeat “Hey Porter” needed a weeper as its companion on the single. That night Cash composed “Cry, Cry, Cry,” and in fact it became the single’s A-side. With the local success of that first Sun single, Cash, Perkins, and Grant recorded

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<sup>70</sup> David Sanjek, “All the Memories Money Can Buy: Marketing Authenticity and Manufacturing Authorship” working draft in author’s possession, revision published in Eric Weisbard, ed. *This is Pop: In Search of the Elusive at Experience Music Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2004)

<sup>71</sup> James Cobb, “Rednecks, White Socks, and Pina Coladas? Country Music Ain’t What It Used to Be...And It Really Never Was” *Southern Cultures* 5:4 (Winter 1999):41-42

<sup>72</sup> Bill Malone, “The Gospel Truth: Christianity and Country Music” in Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, *The Encyclopedia of Country Music* (New York: Oxford University, 1998):219-220

another song Cash had composed in the Air Force, and it soon became Cash's first Top Ten Country hit and one of the signature songs of his career. "Folsom Prison Blues" demonstrates exactly the amalgam of influences that Cobb argued for in the first country music. In his writing of the song Cash was heavily influenced by the Hollywood B-movie *Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison*, and by composer Gordon Jenkins' "Crescent City Blues," from his experimental 1953 album *Seven Dreams*. Jenkins' influence was actually more than heavy: he later sued Cash successfully for plagiarism after a roaring live version of the song became a #1 Country hit in 1968 and brought Cash significant income.<sup>73</sup>

These first songs demonstrate rather transparently both the mediated and commercial nature of the music that Cash made. Though he initially wanted to record gospel songs, he was willing to leave those behind and record non-gospel material. But this was a concession, not an outright forsaking: both in the Air Force with a makeshift band and then in Memphis with Perkins and Grant, Cash sang and composed a variety of songs, not just gospel.<sup>74</sup> This was a temporary concession, though, and when Don Law of powerful Columbia Records approached Cash in 1958 trying to lure him away from Sun, one of the selling points was that Columbia had the resources to allow Cash to record less-lucrative gospel material.<sup>75</sup> His second album for Columbia was *Hymns by Johnny Cash*, and throughout his career Cash, as will be seen, wrote and recorded gospel music, though it was never the generator of sales that songs like "I Walk the Line" and "Ring of Fire" were. This is suggestive evidence that a drive for religious expression

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<sup>73</sup> Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison: The Making of a Masterpiece* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 2004):19-21; see Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 63-71 and Cash, *Man in Black* 46-48 on details of the first Sun recordings

<sup>74</sup> See Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 56 for the songs Cash, Perkins, and Grant performed on Memphis radio in 1954, and Cash's letters to his fiancée Vivian in Vivian Cash with Ann Sharpsteen, *I Walked the Line: My Life With Johnny* (New York: Scribner, 2007) for the various types of songs he listened to and sang while in the Air Force

<sup>75</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 95; Cash, *Man in Black* 59-60

originated from Cash himself, that—unlike the example of “Cry, Cry, Cry”—no one was telling him what to do.

But, of course, even the fruits of that drive for religious expression are ones that we get in the form of a mediated, commercial product. More generally, one does not spend almost fifty years (1955-2003) in the public eye without considerable drive and ambition, a drive and ambition to be heard by significant numbers of people. In August 1974 journalist Patrick Carr spoke with Cash, on the heels of a string of albums (*The Gospel Road*, *Johnny Cash and His Woman*, and *Ragged Old Flag*) which had been Cash’s first to place outside the Country Top Ten. Carr asked Cash about rumors that he was dissatisfied with some of his recent work, and Cash said that he was going to “try different things, because it’s apparent that what I’ve been doing is not what the people really want to hear. So I’m going to try to do something that they want to hear.”<sup>76</sup> Almost thirty years later, as his health was badly declining, Cash said at the close of another interview with Carr that “my worst moment is having to sing and I’ve got no voice to do it with. My best moment is when I know that the song I’m singing is pleasing people, and it’s really sounding good. That’s what it’s all about.”<sup>77</sup> Michael Streissguth presents solid evidence that Cash’s slide into a long period of low commercial success (1973-1993) deeply disturbed Cash, and contributed to a downward spiral in which Cash’s own creative spirit was badly dampened.<sup>78</sup>

But Streissguth also argues that even in the 1980s, when Cash hit a creative and commercial nadir, he held on to a distinct personal vision, one that sustained him throughout his career. He continued to sing songs of “men and women dealing with defining circumstances such as death, loneliness, guilt, temptation, and confinement,” and although a creatively-barren Cash

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<sup>76</sup> Patrick Carr, “What Now, John Cash?” *Country Music* December 1974 in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 171

<sup>77</sup> Patrick Carr, “Johnny Cash: The Spirit is Willing” *Journal of Country Music* 22:3 (2002):23

<sup>78</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 206 especially, but see all of section 4, “A Cold, Wild Wind, 1973-1993”

“rarely wrote anymore about such themes himself, he clung to them, determined to be the one who brought them to American audiences.”<sup>79</sup> This is a germane point, and the flip side of the drive and ambition to be heard. Could Cash have stayed almost fifty years in the music business—mediated, commercial form that it is—if he did not possess a deep and enduring drive not just to make money or be famous, but to create and perform musical art? Would someone who was simply a dutiful employee of a record company, or a money-seeking showman, prompt the varied accolades that Cash received in the wake of his death, if he was not also an artist with some vision to convey? These are perhaps open questions, but this study proceeds on the assumption that Cash was an artist with a vision of his own, albeit one that he conveyed in a mediated, commercial form. David Sanjek argues that “we can come to some understanding of the forces against which musicians must contend and regardless of which they occasionally remain true to some value system only by examining individual instances of cultural production,” and in examining Cash’s music such institutional “forces” will be noted and analyzed, but with the running assumption that their mediated, commercial nature does not inherently and automatically cancel out the “value system” that drove Cash to make music and put it before the public.<sup>80</sup>

Indeed, it is precisely recorded music as a cultural production of wide visibility that allows for rigorous examination of Cash’s religion over the course of a lifetime. While Flannery O’Connor’s fiction and Robert Coles’ fieldwork (to be analyzed in chapter 2) are evidence that the rural poor of the New South had complex religious lives, we do not have adequate source materials to flesh out, say, an individual sharecropper’s religious struggles and personal development. Echoing Benjamin Hedin’s claim that no other modern American songwriter

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<sup>79</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 228

<sup>80</sup> Sanjek, “All the Memories Money Can Buy”

showed Cash's obsessive struggle with faith, it is perhaps not a stretch to say that Cash wrestled more visibly and enduringly than any other child of the rural New South with the inherited faith of his youth.<sup>81</sup> Many other children of the rural diaspora may have struggled deeply with the present meaning of their inherited religion—but certainly not as visibly. Or, perhaps, they may not have struggled with it. I am simply claiming here that the religion Cash articulated in his music was representative of a stratum of New South religious life, not that Cash represents the adult experiences of the last generation off the farms of the old rural South. His adult perpetuation of and engagement with tradition was an active choice, not an automatic legacy. Cash perpetuated and engaged with that tradition in creative and complicated ways, I argue, but the inherited faith itself was creative and complicated—hardly a static and simple “old time religion,” as an enduring cliché has it.

The dissertation proceeds sequentially. Chapter 2 is a critical examination of the historiography that clears the ground and frees up imaginative space by arguing that the two regnant models of white “southern religion” and “the black church” fail to capture the entirety of mass religious forms in the New South. I also argue that the available models for interpreting poor people's religion are insufficient, and using Flannery O'Connor and Robert Coles, I show how religion can be a complicated sensibility and more than just a coping mechanism or “otherworldly” compensation. Chapter 3 paints a portrait of the social context in which the rural poor lived, and it puts a human face on that world through Cash's own prose recollections. It also enumerates the quantifiable, structural ways in which the religious institutions and practices of the rural masses differed from those of the regional bourgeoisie. Chapters 4-7 then move into the

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<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Ted Olson surveys the autobiographical materials of major country performers and finds that only Cash sought to identify with and personally perpetuate the religion he absorbed in his youth. See Ted Olson, ““Your Inner Voice That Comes from God:’ Country Singers’ Attitudes toward the Sacred” in Charles Wolfe and James Akenson, eds. *Country Music Annual* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2000)



ethos or sensibility articulated and circulated in the churches of the poor. Each chapter pursues a principal theme and interprets it in light of past tradition and present New South experience. In these chapters Cash and his family are deliberately supporting characters, because I want to show that a distinct religious sensibility existed independently of Cash and had a New South reality outside of either his memories or his creative musical expressions. Chapters 8 and 9 then zoom in closely on Cash's adult art in the medium of commercial music. I demonstrate the ways in which he struggled publicly with the meaning of his childhood religion, and I show how he dramatized the basic themes of that religion in musical art that engaged with both a changing culture and his own public persona. In Chapter 10, a short conclusion, I offer a few reflections on the idea of religion as tradition—not just a frozen, stable entity—in the context of the mid-twentieth century transformation of the South.

Though he was a creative and complicated person who cut a large figure in country music and American pop culture, Cash is also representative of a distinct religious ethos forged in the New South. Through his prose memories, but especially through his music, I am thus seeking to reveal the principal themes of the Protestantism of the rural masses: making sense of Cash's adult religious expression (chapters 8 and 9) involves moving backwards to the religious ethos of the rural poor of his youth (chapters 4-7). By "rural masses," "rural Protestants," or "rural poor," I mean white *and* black. A distinct religious sensibility crossed the color line, though not the class line. This claim, however, flies in the face of some forty years of historiography on religion in the New South, and on much of the more general body of scholarship on the New South, so chapters 2 and 3 seek to carve out space for this idea before moving into closer analysis of the principal themes in a religion that circulated among poor whites and poor blacks, who lived in a hard world and whose religion was, in the words of a white farm laborer who spoke to Robert

Coles in the late 50s, a “hard, hard religion” that presented a complicated mixture of both liberation and demand.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Robert Coles, *Flannery O'Connor's South* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1980):61

## CHAPTER 2

### “HARD, HARD RELIGION:” THE INVISIBLE INSTITUTION OF THE NEW SOUTH

In June 1963, after a severe beating that left her badly injured, Fannie Lou Hamer lay in the Winona, Mississippi jail and tried to make an empathetic appeal to the jailer’s wife. Hamer evoked the text considered sacred by many in the region that H.L. Mencken described in the mid-20s as the “Bible Belt.” Resolute in the wake of violence, Hamer made an importunate demand on the white woman: “You must be Christian people...I want you to read Acts 17:26.” The jailer’s wife listened attentively and wrote down the reference. However, though she and her daughter had secretly been bringing water to Hamer before this time, after Hamer’s appeal they never reappeared.<sup>1</sup> The scene presented an upsetting theological challenge for the jailer’s wife, for the contemporary social meaning of the biblical passage was a little too clear: “He hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.” Even if by passive inaction as opposed to her husband’s active violence, her commitment to white supremacy—her identity as a white woman differentiated from a black woman by laws and everyday codes of behavior—superseded Hamer’s appeal to a fellowship of two Protestant Christians striving for obedience to a sacred Word.

This (perhaps emblematic) scene dramatizes themes that have been central to the historiography of Protestantism in the post-Civil War South. Race relations—or rather racial divisions and racial identities—have pervaded the literature, from Samuel Hill’s pioneering “The South’s Culture-Protestantism” in 1962 to Paul Harvey’s 2005 *Freedom’s Coming: Religious*

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<sup>1</sup> “The Winona Incident, An Interview with Annelle Ponder and Fannie Lou Hamer, June 1963” in Pat Watters and Reese Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacob’s Ladder: the Arrival of Negroes in Southern Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967):372-373

*Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era*, from Joseph Washington's *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* in 1964 to the 2000 collection *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African-American Religion*. While most historians would concede that whites and blacks have shared some specific cultural practices, such as reverence for a sacred text, they would also quickly point out that the experience of race has been so powerful that blacks and whites read and appropriate that text in markedly different ways. Their racially different religious sensibilities thus demand distinct and separate scholarly treatment. So we have the now-familiar categories of "southern religion," or white Protestantism whose character is best understood by comparison with the different shape that Protestantism took in the rest of the nation; and, on the other hand, "the black church," which has united the experience of an oppressed race in the context of a national white supremacy, whether that be bustling 1920s Chicago or the depopulating world of the 1950s Black Belt.

A few scholars have sought to portray a less-monolithic "southern religion," devoting attention to long-established Jewish and Catholic communities or to emergent Muslims and Hindus.<sup>2</sup> But they all also demonstrate that these religious minorities must define themselves in the face of a Protestantism that unites a majority of white people in the region. If confined or trimmed off a little, "southern religion" remains powerful as a category, both in scholarly assessments and in contemporary popular opinion, particularly as both journalists and historians seek explanations for the background of the now highly visible "Religious Right." Pioneering historian Samuel Hill reiterated in a 2005 essay a judgment he first made in the 1960s. "For close

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<sup>2</sup> For examples, see David Harrell, "Religious Pluralism: Catholics, Jews, and Sectarians" in Charles Reagan Wilson, ed. *Religion in the South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1985); Louis Schmier, "We Were All Part of a Lost Generation: Jewish Religious Life in a Rural Southern Town 1900-1940" in Charles Reagan Wilson, ed. *Cultural Perspectives on the American South Volume 5: Religion* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1991); Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald Mathews, eds. *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004); Charles Lippy, "Tactics for Survival: Religious Minorities" in Charles Reagan Wilson and Mark Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South: In the Evangelical Mode* (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2005).

to two centuries [since the 1830s],” he wrote, “a regional version of evangelical Protestantism prevailed as the pacesetter for the religious life of the people.”<sup>3</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson concurred, restating Hill’s 1967 assessment that white “Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians occupied the mainstream, serving in effect as The Southern Church,” and he described the power of “evangelical Protestantism” as one of “long cultural hegemony.”<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, historians of black religious life have sought to break up the unitary concept of “the black church.” Black religious life, they demonstrate, involved not just the majority Baptist-Methodist congregations, but also a panoply of Holiness and Pentecostal groups—some very small like the Ground and Pillar of Truth and others like the Church of God in Christ with a present membership in the millions—which differ from the Baptists and Methodists in their theology of the spirit and their (tentative) matriarchal practices; religious nationalist groups like Marcus Garvey’s UNIA or Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam, which have denounced Protestantism as a “white man’s religion”; and more geographically specific communities like the Santeria of Afro-Cubans or the ring-shout practicing churches of the Sea Islands, both of which preserve a strong influence of inherited African traditions.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the remarkable racial solidarity at work in the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the predominantly uniform voting habits of the post-Civil Rights Era black electorate, have given the category of “the black church” continued power. In 2005 William Montgomery put the question, “Does such a “black church” exist?” and answered, in keeping with a scholarly tradition as old as

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Hill, “The Peripheral South: Florida and Appalachia” in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South* 159.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “Preachin’, Prayin’, and Singin’ on the Public Square” in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South* 18.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Joseph Washington, *Black Sects and Cults* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972); Hans Baer and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1992); Anthea Butler, “Church Mothers and Migration in the Church of God in Christ” and Jerma Jackson, “Sister Rosetta Tharpe and the Evolution of Gospel Music” both in Schweiger and Mathews, eds. *Religion in the American South*.

the 1903 Atlanta University study *The Negro's Church*—"yes." "The 'black church,'" Montgomery wrote, "thought of in terms of the broad historical development of African American religion—has been and remains, especially in the South, inseparable from the African American people, to a degree unlike any other Christian religious group in the country." Themes of "unity and freedom" are "at the core of the African American Sacred Cosmos."<sup>6</sup>

To date two historians have attempted to write about post-Reconstruction white and black southern Protestants within the covers of the same book. In his 2001 *Religion in Mississippi*, Randy Sparks depicted the New South religious life of whites and blacks as institutionally separate but culturally similar, claimed that the "dispossessed members of both races" formed the primary constituency of the newly emergent Holiness-Pentecostal groups, and argued that the "paternalism" of white churches, "flawed as it was, provided practically the only white criticism and resistance to the worsening racial climate" of the Jim Crow era.<sup>7</sup> In 1997's *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities Among Southern Baptists 1865-1925*, Paul Harvey set out from the premise that "white and black Baptists profoundly influenced each other. Together, and separately, they created different but intertwined southern cultures."<sup>8</sup> He went on to show how the white and black Baptist bourgeoisie of the emergent New South shared denominational organizing strategies, ideals of efficiency and rationality, standards of professionalization, and certain Progressive goals like prohibition. Though institutionally separate from Reconstruction on, the leaders in black and white Baptist denominations articulated religious sensibilities with many similar themes.

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<sup>6</sup> William Montgomery, "Semi-Involuntary: African-American Religion" in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South*.

<sup>7</sup> Randy Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2001):175, 166

<sup>8</sup> Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities Among Southern Baptists 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997):12

Harvey continued this line of argument in his 2005 *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era*, showing periodic examples of “Christian interracialism” in which some whites and blacks sought to challenge Jim Crow on the basis of Christian ideals of fellowship and equality. He also devoted a chapter to “racial interchange,” or shared elements of religious culture like music and early Holiness-Pentecostalism. However, the sweep of Harvey’s book brought it to a mid-century point in which any earlier interracialism or interchange seems to have disappeared. “Black southern religious culture energized the civil rights movement,” he concluded, “while white religious and cultural expressions pervaded segregationist culture and, later, the religious right.”<sup>9</sup> If the religious culture of the two races—not just their racial identity—did and does formatively shape their notably different politics, then this casts doubt back on exactly how similar those religious cultures are, how much interchange there really was, and whether the seeming similarities are substantial or simply superficial. This brings us back to the scene in Winona, and it may now appear as emblematic—two races standing in sharply different relation to the power of the society, with the same religious authority in a sacred text, sure, but reading and appropriating it so differently that it is imperative to talk about their different religious sensibilities in discretely separate interpretations.

This historical approach to post-Civil War Protestantism in the South, seemingly confirmed almost irrefutably in the politics of the past forty years, rests, however, on a number of questionable conceptualizations. The durability of these over forty years of historical scholarship has prevented certain issues from ever arising—at least in a substantive and meaningful way. This chapter interrogates the categories of “southern religion” and “the black church,” pursues their genealogy, and argues that their salience from the 1960s to the present

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<sup>9</sup> Harvey, *Freedom's Coming* 167

actually obscures the dynamics of an older world. In this older world—the New South that arose in the wake of Reconstruction and persisted until the 1940s and early 50s—class differences were substantial and religiously germane *within* both white and black communities. I argue that precisely in the years when Jim Crow was assumed to be utterly determinative, millions of poor white *and* black rural people—tenants and sharecroppers, small farmers, coal miners, timber workers—practiced, precisely in their poverty, a kind of “folk Protestantism” expressing a similar mentality or stance on the world. This popular religious culture, nurtured in the New South’s rural poverty, has been opaque to historians not just because sources for this overwhelmingly oral culture are difficult to recover, but more basically because the operating categories of analysis have inhibited its discovery. This historiographical chapter seeks to establish interpretive space and models for thinking about poor people’s religion. Scrutinizing the dominant historiographical categories is a crucial starting point for opening up a culture that has often attracted the attention of folklorists, photographers, musicians, filmmakers, writers, and others, but remains at the outer margins of historical examination.<sup>10</sup>

The hold of the denominational model has proven remarkably powerful, and denominations seem clear evidence of the imprint of regional and racial identities on religious life. Where do we look for religion? We look to those groups that common sense tells us are “religious” groups, with regular meetings, some kind of organizational structure, enduring practices, and a set of distinct shared beliefs. In the postbellum South, from the end of the Civil War to the present, the overwhelmingly dominant groups, among both whites and blacks, have been the Baptists and Methodists. In the 1840s white Baptists and Methodists in the South

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<sup>10</sup> Several of Charles Reagan Wilson’s essays, collected in *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis* (1995), have given snapshots of this layer of folk religious culture, but it remains heavily overshadowed by the white “southern religion”/ “black church” dichotomy. See his “William Faulkner and the Southern Religious Culture,” “Southern Religion and Visionary Art,” “Digging Up Bones: Death in Country Music,” and “Popular Religion and the Southern Cultural Passage.”



formed separate regional organizations, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the persistence of these throughout most of the New South era (the Methodists rejoined the national group in 1939) seems clear evidence for a distinct regional religion. Furthermore, the massive exodus of black Protestants from formerly biracial churches in the immediate post-Civil War years, their union with either preexisting all-black northern denominations (the African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Zion) or creation of new organizations (the Colored Methodist Episcopal in 1871 and the National Baptist Convention in 1895), and the continuation of these into the present, appears to be an unassailable argument for the embodiment of racial identity in religious life.<sup>11</sup>

In a foundational interpretation of the white religious scene, pioneering historian Samuel Hill wrote in his 1967 *Southern Churches in Crisis* of a “Baptist-Methodist hegemony.”<sup>12</sup> Well-versed in the literature of American religious history, which depicted a pluralistic scene that took shape in the late nineteenth century as massive waves of immigrants poured into the country, Hill found the relative religious homogeneity of the South to be a central element that made its religion distinct. Confirming this sense of regional difference, Kenneth Bailey, in a 1964 work that also has been foundational, explored the “southern” element in the three denominations that divided from their northern counterparts in the contentious years preceding the Civil War: the Southern Baptist Convention; the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the name for the regional denomination after the demise of the

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<sup>11</sup> For the post-Civil War separations, see Katharine Dvorak, *An African-American Exodus: The Segregation of the Southern Churches* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1991). For an interpretation of the creation of the largest black denomination, the National Baptist Convention, as an embodiment of black nationalism, see James Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (Macon: Mercer University, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis* (Boston: Beacon, 1967):34

Confederacy).<sup>13</sup> If names mean anything, then the long separation of these groups from the national bodies provided insights, Bailey argued, into regional religious differences.

Furthermore, even as Hill and Bailey developed the idea that religious life in the South was distinct from that of the nation, they excluded black religious life from this regional portrait on the basis of institutional, denominational separation. Bailey made his strictly white study explicit in his title; he wrote about *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century*, as that Protestantism was organized in all-white, southern-based denominations. In his preface Hill argued that “Negro and white religion *are* different, resisting meaningful comparison under the same categories,” and the “southern church” that he analyzed was a white phenomenon.<sup>14</sup>

The Baptists and Methodists who enjoyed such a long hegemony were, in Hill’s composite portrait, remarkably unchanging in belief and ritual over a long period of time, primarily emotional and without much theology that would require lengthy elaboration, vital bulwarks of the existing social order even to the point of giving it a sacred aura, a powerful factor in uniting whites across class lines, highly self-confident based on their cultural dominance and their sense that once converted the central crisis of their lives was over, and politically active regarding their moral agenda but certainly not on matters of socioeconomic or racial justice. “Popular Southern Protestantism [the Baptist-Methodist hegemony] is substantially the same [as of 1967] syndrome of belief, practice, and emphasis which was born during the formative period, 1740-1830”<sup>15</sup> By the period 1835-1850 “the South had come under the rule of an evangelical hegemony...[evangelical] beliefs were as likely to be held by the unchurched as

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (Gloucester: P. Smith, 1964). The southern Methodists reunited with the national group in 1939, and the southern Presbyterians did the same in 1983. The Southern Baptist Convention remains separate from the American Baptist Convention.

<sup>14</sup> Hill, *Southern Churches* xvi

<sup>15</sup> Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis* 67

by the church. . . . A consensus prevailed.”<sup>16</sup> It was a cultural situation of remarkable “homogeneity” and a “massive penetration of uniform thinking,” maintained and perpetuated by “an essentially static theology.”<sup>17</sup> This unchanging “ideology made no place for or encouragement toward involvement in political, economic, and legal structures,” and it “rarely occurred to the churches of the South that there *is* a Christian social ethic.”<sup>18</sup> The “essence of Christianity” was understood as “the conversion of individuals,” and this “central theme” of individual conversion, this “all-important moment,” was “dynamically separated from the rest of life.”<sup>19</sup> But this lack of a social ethic did not mean that the Baptist-Methodist hegemony had no social force. They were highly moralistic, and “the use of alcohol stands as the leading moral question for the southern church.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the churches worked to confirm and sanction the dominant social order: “secular traditions and values have been ‘baptized,’” thus making for “sacralized secular society.”<sup>21</sup> Social practices like segregation and suspicion of intellectual activity were imbued with a sacred aura because white Protestantism cast “legitimation in the mold of ultimate truth.”<sup>22</sup> The relation between the white churches and the dominant social order was “a long and happy union,” and their cultural dominance gave them a sense of “swashbuckling vitality” that made them “superior in [their] own eyes.”<sup>23</sup> The cultural solidarity provided by white religion was a central element in making for a “solid South:” “The South was as solid religiously as in any other aspect, with perhaps party politics being its only formidable rival.”<sup>24</sup> In sum, “religious orthodoxy of the South has generally been aligned with the causes of

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<sup>16</sup> Samuel Hill, *The South and the North in American Religion* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1980):52

<sup>17</sup> Hill, *South and North* 92, *Southern Churches* 200

<sup>18</sup> Hill, *South and North* 30, *Southern Churches* 13

<sup>19</sup> Hill, *South and North* 25, *Southern Churches* 200, 198

<sup>20</sup> Hill, *Southern Churches* 108

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Hill et al, *Religion and the Solid South* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972):35, 50

<sup>22</sup> Hill et al, *Religion and the Solid South* 29

<sup>23</sup> Hill, *Southern Churches* 194, 30

<sup>24</sup> Hill, *South and North* 91

conservatism, aesthetic vacuity, anti-intellectualism, provincialism, resistance to new cultural currents, regional self-defense, political and economic reaction, and the inculcation of guilt and inflexibility in man's interior life."<sup>25</sup>

"Southern religion" or, more prevalent recently, "evangelical Protestantism," have, since Hill's pioneering work, been shorthand terms to describe the Baptist-Methodist bloc, with the much smaller Presbyterians sometimes included. Hill's evidence was more intuitive and impressionistic than that of a typical empirical historian, but two contemporaneous works, Rufus Spain's 1967 *At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists 1865-1900* and John Lee Eighmy's 1972 *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists*, extensively examined materials of the largest white denomination and reached conclusions that fortified Hill's portrait. In the subsequent historiography their arguments have been extended beyond the SBC to flesh out Hill's idea of a socially compromised, monolithic white "southern church."<sup>26</sup>

In the 1980s and 90s Hill retreated somewhat from his characterizations, conceding that white religious life contained "considerable diversity," editing a volume exploring *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience*, publishing three lectures as *One Name But Several Faces: Variety in Popular Christian Denominations in Southern History*, and agreeing with the criticisms of his older position made by Beth Schweiger in her paper "The Captivity of Southern Religious History." Nevertheless, the model he established in the 1960s and 70s endures. In his

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<sup>25</sup> Hill et al, *Religion and the Solid South* 182

<sup>26</sup> Rufus Spain, *At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists 1865-1900* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1967); John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1972). Ted Ownby's creative cultural history *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South 1865-1920* (1990) departs from the historiography with its questions of gender, not race. Ownby also demonstrates cultural struggles, not just "captivity" or passivity. However, in his well-evidenced portrait of white Protestants, Ownby essentially supports the moralistic, monolithic model of Hill, Spain, and Eighmy: "the moral attitudes of Southern evangelicals [were] the accepted morality of the region. Even if many Southerners often deviated from that moral code, virtually everyone had the same ideas about what was right and wrong." Ownby, *Subduing Satan* 128

1993 essay “The Southern Religious Culture: Distinctiveness and Social Change,” Charles Reagan Wilson reiterated most elements of Hill’s portrait, and in 2005 he wrote that “the central theme of religion in the South has been the compelling drive toward conversion and the moral life afterwards.”<sup>27</sup> John Boles, one of the pioneer scholars of the early evangelical movements in the South, wrote in 1998 that early evangelical Protestantism underwent an “evolution that, by 1830, produced a region of remarkable religious homogeneity.”<sup>28</sup> In seeking the genealogy of the white and black “civil religions” of the South which confronted each other in the Civil Rights era, Andrew Manis wrote that “by the mid-twentieth century, the [white] South was *par excellence* the region where calls for a ‘Christian America’ were welcome and where religious and cultural dissent was not. In the South moral custodians were largely free to envision a happily homogenous, WASPish Southland and nation.”<sup>29</sup>

Recent criticisms of the Hill portrait are also testaments to its enduring power.<sup>30</sup> In 1997 Paul Harvey charged that “an overly simple and static use of the concept of evangelicalism hides the diversity of southern religious life,” that as then used “the concept of southern evangelicalism thus explains everything and nothing at the same time.”<sup>31</sup> A year later Beth Schweiger extended this judgment, writing critically that “the question remains whether the very term “southern religion’, which imposes a singular unity and purpose and mind, serves at all.”<sup>32</sup> The hold of the homogenous model had stifled explorations of both class and theology: religious historians had invoked “denominational affiliation as shorthand for social class [but] the sources contradict this

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “The Southern Religious Culture: Distinctiveness and Social Change” in Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie* and “Preachin’, Prayin’, and Singin’, on the Public Square” in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South* 9

<sup>28</sup> John Boles in “Forum: Southern Religion” *Religion and American Culture* (summer 1998):171

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Manis, “The Civil Religions of the South” in Wilson and Silk, *Religion and Public Life* 170.

<sup>30</sup> For a recent positive assessment of the Hill model, see Ted Ownby, “Ethos Without Ethic: Samuel S. Hill and Southern Religious History” in Glenn Feldman, ed. *Reading Southern History: Essays on Interpreters and Interpretations* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2001)

<sup>31</sup> Harvey, *Redeeming the South* 1-2

<sup>32</sup> Beth Schweiger, “Forum: Southern Religion” 162

kind of analysis,” and they “have not been interested enough in the ways in which ordinary southerners thought about religion.”<sup>33</sup> Donald Mathews, a long-time scholar of antebellum southern religion, surveyed the whole field in 1997 and concluded that “we have assumed the homogeneity of southern religion without looking sufficiently at the *nature* of differences affected by class, region, and theology.” The “treasured fallacy” of presuming regional uniformity needed to go.<sup>34</sup> Scholars needed to explore differences in a more substantive way: “variety represents more than taste, style, and mood; it may also represent different responses to power or powerlessness.”<sup>35</sup> Major lacunae and conceptual roadblocks existed in the historiography: “still elusive in most writing about southern religion is the substance of belief,” historians had assumed too readily that “religion in the South has not changed over time,” invoking denominational sources as voices of mass opinion was faulty and as a result “popular religion in the South remains unstudied,” and religious historians had failed to make a compelling case that religion was critical to understanding other phenomena in the region: “the major synthesizers of southern history have not been forced to explain the role of religion in southern life.”<sup>36</sup>

Those pointed criticisms made, however, Mathews seemed to fall back on stock notions of white religious uniformity when he sought to redress the last charge. The significant rise in church membership (and the increased cultural power of churches) and the widespread practice of lynching belonged to the same era, 1880-1930, and this was more than coincidental, Mathews argued in a 2000 essay “The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice” (also revised and published in

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<sup>33</sup> Schweiger 164, 166

<sup>34</sup> Donald Mathews, “Christianizing the South: Sketching a Synthesis” in Harry Stout and D.G. Hart, eds. *New Directions in American Religious History* (New York: Oxford University, 1997):103

<sup>35</sup> Donald Mathews, “We Have Left Undone Those Things Which We Ought to Have Done: Southern Religious History in Retrospect and Prospect” *Church History* 67 (June 1998):317

<sup>36</sup> Mathews, “We Have Left Undone” 319; Donald Mathews “Forum: Southern Religion” 150; “Christianizing the South” 108n7; “We Have Left Undone” 306

2004 as “ ‘Lynching is Part of the Religion of Our People:’ Faith in the Christian South”).

Historians seeking to understand lynching, and segregation, needed to understand religiously-based conceptualizations of purity and punishment if they were to make sense of their subject-matter. Starting with Lillian Smith’s writings about the southern white Protestant focus on punishment and W.J. Cash’s characterization of southern white Protestantism as fixated on “the blood sacrifice,” Mathews sought to trace out the cultural sensibility that made lynching an imaginable practice. Southern white Protestantism perpetuated St. Anselm’s understanding of the crucifixion as penal sacrifice, the idea that Christ died as a substitute for the punishment of human sin demanded by a wrathful “God who ruled in terroristic rage.”<sup>37</sup> Based on select songs in the 1847 shapenote compilation *Southern Harmony*, the theological writings of denominational leaders E.Y. Mullins (Baptist), Enoch Marvin (Methodist), Thomas Ralston (Methodist), and Robert Lewis Dabney (Presbyterian) over the years 1874-1924, and John Crowe Ransom’s *God Without Thunder* (1930), Mathews concluded that an Anselmian understanding of penal substitution was “the pervasive drama of salvation preached from pulpits throughout the region.”<sup>38</sup> Put succinctly and provocatively, “blood sacrifice [was] the connection between the purpose of white supremacists, the purity signified in segregation, the magnificence of God’s wrath, and the permission granted the culture through the wrath of ‘justified’ Christians to sacrifice black men on the cross of white solidarity.”<sup>39</sup> The purification of the (white) community that was wrought through the violent death of a black man was also codified in less dramatic but no less powerful ways: late nineteenth-early twentieth century laws mandating segregation, disfranchisement, and prohibition, all of whose timing, again, was not coincidental. “The religion that whites inherited and the religion that they fabricated allowed them the illusion

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<sup>37</sup> Donald Mathews, “The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice” *Journal of Southern Religion* 3 (2000):15

<sup>38</sup> Mathews, “The Southern Rite” 23

<sup>39</sup> Mathews, “The Southern Rite” 10

of purity and righteousness,” and it fostered the practice of “pushing ‘everything dark, dangerous, and evil’ [quoting Lillian Smith] to ‘the rim of one’s life’ [Smith].”<sup>40</sup> Mathews concluded that “the souls of black folk seemed to find salvation in a distinctly different way from the self-righteousness and blanched holiness of a segregated white community.”<sup>41</sup>

Here we are back to a common white religion that was vital to the cultural solidarity that perpetuated Jim Crow. I appreciate Mathews’ goal of making a compelling case that religious ideas and practices must be explored if historians are to make sense of other phenomena in the culture, but some of the broad claims made in his two essays do not hold up. As he himself notes, in the period 1865-1940, 3200 blacks and 1400 whites were lynched in the South. Was it an exclusively racist practice, as he claims—“blacks were “uniquely worthy of sacrificial treatment”?”<sup>42</sup> If white religion made whites push dark and dangerous phenomena to the margins, and seek blood sacrifice through black men, how did it come about that 1400 whites were lynched also? Nor does disfranchisement hold up as part of a strategy for “purifying the culture, its people, and their politics” by removing black voting power.<sup>43</sup> A number of religious historians have consistently portrayed disfranchisement as a movement to destroy the black electorate, and they have linked the subsequent “solid South” to their portraits of a unified white religion.<sup>44</sup> But as Morgan Kousser carefully demonstrated in his 1974 *The Shaping of Southern Politics*, blacks

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<sup>40</sup> Donald Mathews, “Lynching is Part of the Religion of Our People: Faith in the Christian South” in Schweiger and Mathews, eds. *Religion in the American South* 182, 164

<sup>41</sup> Schweiger and Mathews, eds. *Religion in the American South* 2, 178

<sup>42</sup> Schweiger and Mathews, eds. *Religion* 181

<sup>43</sup> Schweiger and Mathews, eds. *Religion* 163

<sup>44</sup> Samuel Hill, *The South and the North* 91: “in many ways this period [1885-1900] represents the beginning of southern religion as we think of it today. The South was as solid religiously as in any other aspect, with perhaps southern politics being its only formidable rival”; Charles Reagan Wilson, “Preachin’, Prayin, and Singin’” in Wilson and Silk, eds. 13: “the racial separation of churches after the war helped crystallize a self-perception of a white religion and cultural solidarity that would come to be reflected in white religious support for Jim Crow segregation laws and political disfranchisement”; Paul Harvey, “At Ease in Zion, Uneasy in Babylon: White Evangelicals” in Wilson and Silk, eds. 68: “the white South may have changed political parties over the last generation, but it is still solid”; Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming* 256: “white southern evangelicals still live in a ‘solid South,’ but one that is solidly conservative Republican.”



and poor whites were disfranchised. It was a (successful) strategy by elite white Democrats to crush black-poor white political coalitions, whether in the Republican party (which might have gained new life had the Lodge bill of 1890 passed) or the Populist party (which in the 1890s was a potent threat in southern and Midwestern states).<sup>45</sup> Kousser showed that the votes for disfranchising legislation consistently corresponded to degrees of wealth among whites—the wealthy voted for it, the poor did not—and he concluded his study with a poignant vignette of a poor white man leaving the polls in humiliation, hat in hand, because he could not pass a writing test and thus was “unfit” to vote. The South of 1900-1950 was “solid” because significant numbers of the electorate had been stripped of the franchise, and voter turnout fell from around 73% in the 1890s to 30% from the 1900s on to mid-century: this is not evidence for white political uniformity, and religious historians who invoke a “solid South” as evidence for a common white religion are resting their argument on sand.<sup>46</sup>

Religiously-informed ideas of purity were certainly at work in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century South, most obviously evident in the innovative movement for prohibition. Again, however, this is dubious evidence for a common white religion teaching that “sin was black” and “black was evil.”<sup>47</sup> The white and black bourgeoisie led the prohibition movement, a movement that prominent white Baptist John E. White described as aimed at “the lower levels of both races.”<sup>48</sup> One may also wonder about exactly how racialist ideas of purity were in a culture that ridiculed poor whites as “trash.” In the summer of 1936, James Agee stood in Greensboro, Alabama and listened to the white townspeople describe the white tenants who lived in the

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<sup>45</sup> Historians today may indulge in doubts about the real potential power of these parties; white Democrats of that era certainly did not. They used violence, ridicule, fraud, and their crowning achievement (disfranchisement) to destroy Republicans and Populists.

<sup>46</sup> Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics* 224-225

<sup>47</sup> Mathews, “We Have Left Undone” 320

<sup>48</sup> Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming* 56-56; John E. White, “Prohibition: the New Task and Opportunity of the South” *South Atlantic Quarterly* April 1908, quoted in Harvey, *Redeeming the South* 220

countryside, families that Agee was staying with and writing about. “Fred Ricketts? Why, that dirty son-of-a-bitch, he *brags* that he hasn’t bought his family a bar of soap in five years...why, Ivy Pritchett was one of the worst whores in the whole part of the country; only one that was worse was her own mother. They’re about the lowest trash you can find...Give them money and all they’ll do is throw it away.”<sup>49</sup>

It would be a bit of a stretch, it seems, to invoke the voice of a John E. White or a Greensboro townsman and use it as source material for the self-understanding of those being described. This, however, has been the perennial approach of those using the denominational model, and Mathews continues in this tradition in his source materials for Anselmian ideas of sacrifice and punishment. Were the bloody odes of the 1847 *Southern Harmony* still sung a generation later, when the practice of lynching flourished? Did the theological treatises of a Dabney or a Mullins have a readership beyond the tiny minority of seminary-trained ministers in the region? How accurate in describing regional Protestantism are the polemical writings of a W.J. Cash or a John Crowe Ransom, the one a devotee of H.L. Mencken, the other a consciously “unorthodox” iconoclast? Is this solid evidence here for “the pervasive drama of salvation preached from pulpits throughout the region?”<sup>50</sup>

Some of the first historians who used the denominational model to characterize “southern religion” did feel a need to justify the broad scope of what they were claiming based on their limited sources (denominational newspapers, minutes and journals). Though the southern Baptists he quoted in *At Ease in Zion* were denominational newspaper editors, SBC officials, and state denominational elites, Rufus Spain consciously used them as barometers of mass opinion. This was because, he argued, the structure of the Baptist denomination made it like American

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<sup>49</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988 [1941]):79

<sup>50</sup> Mathews, “Southern Rite” 23

democracy: the elite had to say what the masses wanted to hear.<sup>51</sup> This is a dubious idea resting on normative assumptions, that democracy, in state or church, “works.” John Lee Eighmy also used the denominational newspapers heavily as barometers of mass opinion, claiming that “because these weekly publications were official organs of the state conventions, their editors tended to be every bit as sensitive to the popular will as the denominational bodies.”<sup>52</sup> In this presumed responsiveness to “the popular will,” Eighmy found the primary explanation for the highly conservative character of white Baptists in the South. “Church leaders are restrained from supporting progressive social causes,” he argued, “not so much by formal church directives as by the potential reaction of ordinarily complacent constituents, most of whom are lower- and middle-class whites.”<sup>53</sup>

This approach, of using an articulate elite to speak for mass opinion, then tracing the unprogressive nature of that elite’s opinions back to the restraining influence of the (still voiceless and unflatteringly painted) masses, is suspect.<sup>54</sup> It has been a staple element in the historiography, a trope that one might call “the democratic drag.” Samuel Hill articulated it at the conclusion of *Southern Churches in Crisis*. Hoping that a cosmopolitan elite would emerge to

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<sup>51</sup> Rufus Spain, *At Ease in Zion* xi

<sup>52</sup> John Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity* 135

<sup>53</sup> Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity* xii

<sup>54</sup> Consider the following sweeping claims based on sources from denominational leaders: “Southern Baptists opposed the organized feminist movement and all other efforts to effect any significant change in the traditional role of women in society. Their opposition rested basically on religious belief.”(Spain 165) “Southern Baptist opinion on the economic issues of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century reveals a general lack of sympathy for organized labor and a failure to grasp the complexity of economic problems in an industrial society.”(Eighmy 101) “Southern Baptists meant to maintain the process of repentance, conversion, and rebirth threatened by the secularizing tendencies of social Christianity.”(James Thompson, “*Tried as by Fire: Southern Baptists and the Religious Controversies of the 1920s* (Macon: Mercer University, 1982):42) “The real challenge to the fundamental structure of American society did not emanate from radical conspiracies of workers, political radicals, and blacks, as Presbyterians believed. It was more subtle and close to home and its source was American women.”(Wayne Flynt, “Feeding the Hungry and Ministering to the Broken-Hearted: The Presbyterian Church in the US and the Social Gospel 1900-1920 in Wilson, ed. *Religion in the South* 119); “Turn-of-the-century Southern Baptists developed neither a critique of capitalism nor industrialization.”(Keith Harper, *The Quality of Mercy: Southern Baptists and Social Christianity 1890-1920* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1996):118) “Southern Baptist churches were alarmed by the series of violent struggles taking place in Tennessee and the Carolinas over the unionization of textile workers...”(H.B. Cavalcanti, “God and Labor in the South: Southern Baptists and the Right to Unionize 1930-1950” *Journal of Church and State* 40 (Summer 1997):646)

expand the horizons of provincial denominations, he lamented that “popular opinions and prejudices have tended to dominate policy.”<sup>55</sup> This presumption is tied to powerful elements in American culture: the masses—*hoi poloi* if one wants—always lower the standards and hinder beneficial change, electing reactionary demagogues, perpetuating bad taste and anti-intellectualism, and the like. Traces of this assumption have shaped the historiography of white Protestantism, and without need for sources from the masses, scholars have *a priori* found them to be the explanation for why white Protestantism was primarily emotional and had so little intellectual content, why it was allied with political and social conservatism and had only a minority of progressives, why it was so suspicious of change.<sup>56</sup>

If the scholarship on white Protestantism has depicted churches deeply and definitively accommodated to the order of Jim Crow, with potentially critical voices constrained by the sentiment of the masses, the scholarship on black churches in the New South has portrayed them as the preeminent race institution, vital to the formation of racial solidarity and the most enduring embodiment of resistance to the culture of white supremacy. Though this model began to take definitive scholarly shape in the 1960s and early 70s, its roots are significantly older and can be traced back to the era of rigid segregation.

The 1903 Atlanta University study *The Negro's Church* (edited by W.E.B. Du Bois, Kelly Miller, and Mary Church Terrell), Carter Woodson's 1921 *The History of the Negro*

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<sup>55</sup> Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis* 205

<sup>56</sup> In addition to Spain, Eighmy, and Hill, see Wayne Flynt, “Dissent in Zion: Alabama Baptists and Social Issues, 1900-1914” *Journal of Southern History* 35 (November 1969):524, 542; Edgar Thompson, “God and the Southern Plantation System” in Hill et al, *Religion and the Solid South* 62; Wayne Flynt, “Alabama White Protestantism and Labor, 1900-1914” *Alabama Review* 25 (July 1972):216; C. Dwight Dorrough, *The Bible Belt Mystique* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974):173, 180; Norman Yance, *Religion Southern Style: Southern Baptists and Society in Historical Perspective* (Danville: Association of Baptist Professors of Religion, 1978):29, 62; Wayne Flynt, “One in the Spirit, Many in the Flesh: Southern Evangelicals” in Harrell, ed. *Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism* 28; David Harrell, “The Evolution of Plain-Folk Religion in the South, 1835-1920” in Samuel Hill, ed. *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1988):36; Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South* 145, 214

*Church*, Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson’s extensive 1933 study *The Negro’s Church*, and E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Church in America* (published posthumously in 1964 but developing out of a 1953 lecture) were all scholarly interpretations by “race” men and women—intellectuals who were dedicated to racial activism and meditated on practical ways in which racial consciousness and ideals of resistance could be taught and disseminated. For Du Bois and his colleagues, no single institution touched the masses of black Americans like their churches. “The Negro church is a mighty social power today,” they wrote in the conclusion of the study, “but it needs cleansing, reviving, and inspiring, and once purged of its dross it will become as it ought to be, and as it is *now*, to some extent, the most powerful agency in the moral development and social reform of 9,000,000 Americans of Negro blood.”<sup>57</sup> A generation later in their own lengthy interpretation, Mays and Nicholson concluded with an idealized portrait of “the genius of the Negro’s church.” It was “the Negro’s very own,” a space of “opportunity for the common man,” a place that gave “opportunity for self-expression that no other enterprise affords.”<sup>58</sup>

The Du Bois and Mays works were contemporary field studies, critical of black religious life yet hopeful that black churches could step into the vanguard of activism, while Woodson’s book used denominational histories to weave together the story of the emergence of all-black denominations over the course of the nineteenth century. E. Franklin Frazier’s *Negro Church in America* presented a sociological model for why churches as institutions must have taken on numerous functions in the confining context of Jim Crow. Echoing Mays and Nicholson’s idealized “genius,” Frazier argued that “as a result of the elimination of Negroes from the political life of the American community, the Negro church became the arena of their political activities. The church was the main area of social life in which Negroes could aspire to become

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<sup>57</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, ed., *The Negro Church* (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2003 [1903]):208

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* (New York: Arno, 1969 [1933]):278-282

the leaders of men...For the Negro masses, in their social and moral isolation in American society, the Negro church community has been a nation within a nation.”<sup>59</sup> Frazier was sharply critical of the mentality of black churches, arguing that they were “responsible for the so-called backwardness of American Negroes,” and he hoped that the breaking down of segregation would free blacks from the confinements of the churches’ culture, but the multifunctional model he elaborated, building on the prior scholarship, has had a long afterlife.<sup>60</sup> In the 1960s sociologists coined the term “semi-involuntary” to describe the multifunctional model, and in a 2005 essay William Montgomery reiterated its meaning. “For decades,” he wrote, “African Americans possessed few other organizations and facilities they could call their own,” and so churches stepped into the vacuum as spaces for the realization of human and social needs.<sup>61</sup>

In various works from the early 70s to the present, C. Eric Lincoln, Gayraud Wilmore, Albert Raboteau, Peter Paris, Larry Murphy, and others have reiterated this model of black churches as multifunctional “race” institutions. “The black church was the unifying agent that made of a scattered confusion of slaves a free people, a *Blackamerican* people,” Lincoln argued in a 1981 lecture. “The black church began as a religious society, but it was more than that. It was the black Christian’s government, social club, secret order, espionage system, political party, and impetus to revolution...the black church has been womb and mother to a whole spectrum of black leadership of every generation of its existence [and] the most authentic representation of whatever it means to be black in America.”<sup>62</sup> Depicting a distinct “black Christian tradition” at odds with the “Western Christian tradition,” Peter Paris asserted in his 1985 *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* that “the uniqueness of the black churches is seen in the fact that they are

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<sup>59</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken, 1964):48-49

<sup>60</sup> Frazier, *Negro Church* 90

<sup>61</sup> William Montgomery, “Semi-Involuntary” in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life* 87

<sup>62</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, “The Black Church in the Context of American Religion” in Hill, ed. *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience* 59

(as the literature constantly asserts) unequivocally ‘race institutions.’” Churches played no small role; they “have been the custodians of the black community’s most basic societal values.”<sup>63</sup> In the tradition of Woodson, historian James Washington narrated the late nineteenth formation of the National Baptist Convention—the largest black religious group then and now—as an institutionalization of the black cultural nationalism, in his 1986 *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power*. In their extensive historical/sociological 1990 study *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya claimed that “a qualitatively different cultural form of expressing Christianity is found in most black churches, regardless of denomination, to this day,” and they described this unique form as the “black sacred cosmos.”<sup>64</sup>

Historian Albert Raboteau agreed in a 1995 essay that “the segregation of black and white churches signified the existence of two Christianities in this nation,” that a “deep chasm...divided them,” and his own historical work since his pathbreaking 1978 *Slave Religion* has treated black religious life as a phenomenon whose story is told in isolation from white religious life.<sup>65</sup> “It makes little sense to insist that there is no such thing as a Black or an African American Christianity,” pioneering historian of black religious life Gayraud Wilmore argued in 1998. A distinct black Christianity has been “a social and cultural reality for more than four hundred years...during most of those years—like it or not—85 to 90 percent of all Black Christians have worshipped with their own race in all-Black conventicles or congregations. Certain characteristics of faith and life, belief and behavior, have resulted from that simple (we

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<sup>63</sup> Peter Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985):9, xii

<sup>64</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham: Duke University, 1990):7,2

<sup>65</sup> Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995):188

should probably say complex) fact.”<sup>66</sup> The presence of such distinct characteristics, Larry Murphy argued in the preface of the 2000 collection *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*, justified scholarly treatment of black Christians as a “discreet group,” and his own article “ ‘All Things to All People:’ The Functions of the Black Church in the Last Quarter of the Nineteenth Century” reiterated Frazier’s model, claiming “ample historical basis” for the assertion that “the church has been at the center of black community life.”<sup>67</sup> Thus historian William Montgomery’s 2005 judgment, noted earlier, that there has been and is such a thing as “the black church,” that the singular religious experience of blacks formed the basis for an “African American Sacred Cosmos,” rests on a durable scholarly tradition and one that has received fortification since the 1960s.

But, as with the historical scholarship on white Protestantism, the evidence at play here is slim, and broadly encompassing statements have been generated from a foundation that bears questioning. A look back at Mays and Nicholson’s foundational *The Negro’s Church* reveals that very few of the 794 churches they studied embodied the model of the multifunctional “race” institution. They were particularly critical of rural churches, noting that they had practically no other “program” than once a month preaching services, that preaching in rural churches “runs along the lines of the magical and otherworldliness with scarcely a dissenting voice,” that rural migrants to northern cities experienced “moral and religious shipwreck” because patterns of worship were so different, that the rural “situation [was] not hopeful” because “in the country, religion is more of an opiate and an escape from life.”<sup>68</sup> Less than a decade after he used denominational histories to narrate black church history, Carter Woodson turned to an in-depth

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<sup>66</sup> Gayraud Wilmore, “What is African American Christianity?” in Larry Murphy, ed. *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion* (New York: New York University, 2000):27-28

<sup>67</sup> Murphy, ed. *Down by the Riverside* 1, 133

<sup>68</sup> Mays and Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* 17, 97-98, 249-250



study of *The Rural Negro* and reached this conclusion: “while the outward appearances of the Negro rural church may seem like the urban, the two are inherently different. The urban church has become a sort of uplift agency; the rural church has remained a mystic shrine. While the urban church is often trying to make this a better world in which to live, the rural church is engaged in immediate preparation for the ‘beautiful land of by and by.’”<sup>69</sup> Rural churches were not the multifaceted race institutions of Frazier’s model.

Through careful historical research and close attention to change over time, a number of historians have helped to recover the context of Mays and Woodson’s era, and in the process of revealing real divisions in black religious life, they have questioned—implicitly or explicitly—the received model of “the black church.” In rather striking contrast to the literature on white Protestantism, they have done this precisely through careful use of denominational materials. Examining the activities of black churchwomen in her 1993 *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920*, Evelyn Higginbotham found “class tensions” at work in bourgeois black women’s struggle to gain social respect through embodying a distinct code of “respectable” behavior. Striving to demonstrate racial self-help, “the zealous efforts of black women’s religious organizations to transform certain behavioral patterns of their people disavowed and opposed the culture of the ‘folk’”: bourgeois self-respect involved a conscious distancing from the slave past and the “folk” present.<sup>70</sup> In his 1993 *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900*, William Montgomery found “deepening social class divisions within the black community” by the late nineteenth century, and he argued that the preacher—often imagined as the consummate “race” man—suffered

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<sup>69</sup> Carter Woodson, *The Rural Negro* (Washington: Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, 1930):159-160

<sup>70</sup> Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1993):14-15. See also Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* 63-69 for New South era class divisions and the morality of respectability.

severe status decline by the turn of the century, as a new and educated bourgeoisie became “disgusted by the emotionalism, ignorance, and occasional moral lapse of the churches’ old leaders.”<sup>71</sup> Opening his 1995 *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*, James Campbell noted “a growing tendency to portray black life—and the ‘black church’ in particular—as unfolding in a separate realm, a realm simultaneously organic to those within and opaque to those without.” He argued that it was precisely “the establishment of independent churches [that] opened new avenues for engaging with the dominant society, both politically and culturally,” and his well-evidenced study revealed that Frazier’s notion of “social and moral isolation in American society” simply did not match the evidence for engagement on a variety of fronts.<sup>72</sup>

Milton Sernett’s 1997 *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* presented ample evidence for real differences between black churches in rural South and urban North, showed the process by which rural migrants’ practices came to transform urban patterns, and argued that the “black church” model emerged in this time as an idealized conception of what the churches should be doing. Reformers sought to push churches away from internal affairs to external ones, to multifaceted “race” concerns, and this ideal had left an enduring legacy. “Many [scholarly] discussions of African American churches today assume that their normative mission is to serve the community by being agents of social change. Less interest is given to the internal life of the churches, that is, specifically to churches as arenas in which

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<sup>71</sup> William Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1993):319, 328. For the black preacher as the quintessential “race” man, see C. Eric Lincoln, ed. *The Black Experience in Religion* (Garden City: Anchor, 1974):65-67; Albert Raboteau, “ ‘Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Forth Her Hands:’ Black Destiny in Nineteenth-Century America” in Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*; Timothy Fulop, “ ‘The Future Golden Day of the Race:’ Millennialism and Black Americans in the Nadir 1877-1901” in Timothy Fulop and Albert Raboteau, eds. *African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997)

<sup>72</sup> James Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University, 1995):xi

matters of ultimate meaning and concern are addressed. The Great Migration propelled this preoccupation with black churches as the means to ends other than those of offering members spiritual refreshment and a place to worship.”<sup>73</sup> Sernett’s historical work offers a genealogy of the model of the “black church,” and when mixed with the work of Higginbotham, Montgomery, and Campbell, shows that black churches have manifested real differences along class lines, that the model of a unitary, multifunctional black church in the vanguard of racial activism has been far more reformers’ ideal than actual reality. Put more positively, for many black Protestants, churches have functioned as religious spaces in their own right—not just places where a circumscribed people institutionalized longings denied by the dominant white society. The critical judgments of Mays and Woodson are both on-the-spot observations of precisely this dynamic.

Joseph Washington’s controversial 1964 study *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* presented an early critical assessment of the functional model. “No book on black religion has caused more consternation among black theologians and scholars of religion,” Alonzo Johnson and Paul Jersild wrote in the preface of their 1996 collection *“Ain’t Gonna Lay My ‘Ligion Down:” African American Religion in the South*.<sup>74</sup> Washington’s book has contributed to the subsequent conversation in an essentially negative sense—scholars have written to passionately refute his arguments. Some of this passion has to do, I think, with the fact that Washington pushed the functional model through to its logical conclusion.

Indebted to and aware of Mays and Nicholson’s study and of the various sociological works of Frazier, Washington argued that black Americans were denied full participation not

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<sup>73</sup> Milton Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African-American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham: Duke University, 1997):4-5

<sup>74</sup> Alonzo Johnson and Paul Jersild, eds. *“Ain’t Gonna Lay My ‘Ligion Down:” African American Religion in the South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1996):2

only in American society but in Christian life as well. As a result, what developed in the separate space of black churches was a “Negro folk religion” that was more an expression of the longing for social freedom and equality than a Christian vision. “It is as the Negro social organization for the advancement of the race—not the ‘Negro church’—that the folk intended the meeting house.” This use of churches for race concerns meant that “Negroes have failed to make real contributions to Protestantism, the Christian faith, or the Christian church,” not because of any “inherent inability,” but because such institutions “were not established to propound theology or liturgical matters.” With a critical eye on the unfolding movement for Civil Rights, Washington argued that “though [movement activists] sing spirituals—‘We Shall Overcome’—and pray before their oppressor, this is a way of fortifying their nonviolence, not an affirmation of their faith in Christian love.” He concluded that “in the process of becoming effective functional institutions, Negro congregations remain dysfunctional communities of faith.”<sup>75</sup>

Washington was looking almost exclusively at urban churches in his analysis, whether represented through historical sources or through his own personal interviews with religious leaders. The more extensive evidence accumulated by subsequent historians (noted above) does not support extending the functional model to all black churches, certainly not rural ones. Nevertheless, Washington put his finger on a rather acute interpretive dilemma. If, as Mays and Nicholson, Frazier, and proponents of the semi-involuntary model argue, black churches were important *by default*, because they served as spaces where a circumscribed people could pursue human aspirations that most people actualize through the ordinary working of society, why treat the religion as the real phenomenon at work? Or why analyze it at all, except as an available tool for other strivings? If, as scholars like Lincoln and Wilmore argue, black Christianity was a

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<sup>75</sup> Joseph Washington, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 1964):40, 38, 17, 141

classic case of an adjective determining the character of a noun, why not study black religion as an utterly singular entity, a race experience—not a variation on a religious tradition that has included people of all different races and social stations?

Washington's critical extension of the functionalist model is highly germane because historians far outside the field of religious history have found it amenable. They may be quite tone deaf to religious longings as ends in themselves, but they can readily grant that black churches have provided space for such human needs as developing a sense of self-worth and training in leadership. The danger, however, is that in this they effectively excise the religious element in church life, treating religion as a mere means rather than as a phenomenon in its own right. Washington's criticism of churches as simply race institutions is also apt. If, as C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya argue in their 1990 study, "the Black Church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the black community," a tremendous weight hangs on the "black church" and there is an understandable reluctance to chip away at a concept that is imagined to involve the very essence of black life in America.<sup>76</sup> If, on the other hand, black churches are at heart communities of faith, not incarnations of racial longings by default, then one is open to finding similarities and commonalities with white churches, without thereby denying that black Americans have had a distinct history of their own.

Though there are significant issues of evidence and thorny interpretive problems, these two models—a white "southern religion" and a "black church"—endure less for strictly scholarly reasons than for their contemporary utility: they seem to make so much sense of the present. That the two models were given distinct scholarly shape or elaboration in the 1960s and early 70s is hardly accidental. In the passionate drama of Civil Rights, scholars saw remarkable racial solidarity on either side of the color line. Most whites lined up in resolute defense of white

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<sup>76</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* 8

supremacy and the order of Jim Crow, while blacks reached across internal class lines to make a formidable assault on structural and cultural racism. A tone of aggrieved lament pervades the foundational literature on white Protestants. Samuel Hill saw white churches “in crisis” because they were not speaking to the massive moral issue of Civil Rights, and Rufus Spain and John Lee Eighmy lamented the accommodated nature of churches “in cultural captivity” and “at ease in Zion.” “The question of the hour,” Hill wrote in 1967 in a historical work that moved well beyond the merely scholarly, “is how the Baptists and Methodists of the South...can be liberated to a willingness to take full responsibility for relating the comprehensive Christian message to the whole social order.”<sup>77</sup> How could “a conservative and culturally pampered institution” find “a richer and more authentic vision,” one that related Christianity to the mass social movement of the time?<sup>78</sup> In striking contrast, scholars of black churches like Gayraud Wilmore in 1973 and C. Eric Lincoln in 1974 jettisoned the critical tone of earlier scholars (Du Bois, Woodson, Mays and Nicholson, Frazier, Joseph Washington). Galvanized by the unmistakable role that churches, ministers, songs, and religious ideas played in the struggle for Civil Rights, they lauded black churches as spaces of communal solidarity and resistance to racism. Whereas “the prevailing doctrine of the White Church was insidiously racist,” Lincoln argued, “the Christianity projected by the Black Church is a humanizing one, taking into account the social, economic, and political aspects of the world.”<sup>79</sup> Wilmore made the idea of black churches as spaces of prophetic critique central to his historical narrative in *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*.

In such a contentious and morally charged time, with whites burning and bombing black churches, denying blacks entrance into their churches, mining the Bible for proof-texts that God sanctioned segregation; with blacks demonstrating remarkable Christian self-control and

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<sup>77</sup> Hill, *Southern Churches* 203

<sup>78</sup> Hill, *Southern Churches* xiii, xi

<sup>79</sup> Lincoln, ed. *The Black Experience in Religion* 2-3

nonretaliation in the face of white violence, praying for their oppressors and singing to God of their sufferings, scholarly suggestions of black and white religious commonalities would have seemed not simply delusional but also morally perverse.

Events of the subsequent forty years, particularly political changes, have fortified this inherited sense that black and white Christianity are two radically different entities. Historians have continued to see instances of social critique emanating from black churches, while white churches seem to have generated a reactionary defense of an older social order. Introducing the 2005 collection *Religion and Public Life in the South*, Charles Reagan Wilson wrote that “the region’s public life will likely retain, in religious terms, the strong imprint of the interaction of white evangelical Protestants and black Protestants.” But this meant division, not commonalities: “the former witness for social morality while the latter testify for social justice.”<sup>80</sup> Paul Harvey concurred in an essay for the collection. “The public life that emanates from the two groups [black and white Protestants in the South] generally leads in such opposite directions that it is necessary to consider them separately.”<sup>81</sup> “Observant evangelical Protestants were the core of the old white Protestant alliance,” Wilson wrote with reference to political scientist John C. Green’s idea that a “white Protestant alliance” was once the “linchpin of the solid South,” and now white Protestants were “the driving constituency of the Religious Right.”<sup>82</sup> By contrast, in his 2001 synthetic history *Canaan Land*, Albert Raboteau reiterated “the centrality of the church in the African American’s search for identity and meaning,” and noted how, through extended social

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<sup>80</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “Mobilized for the Millennium” in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South*. Juxtaposing these two monoliths seems to me to be imaginative backtracking on Wilson’s part. In a series of creative essays in the late 80s and early 90s, published in 1995 as *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis*, Wilson pioneered interesting forays into a rich layer of religious folk culture that crossed the color line. There he argued that “comfortable mainstream town churches”—perhaps those whose progeny “witness for social morality”—“do not exhaust the meaning of religion in the South,” that outside their scope was a “simple folk religion” of “poor whites and blacks.” *Judgment and Grace in Dixie* 62, 68

<sup>81</sup> Harvey, “At Ease in Zion, Uneasy in Babylon: White Evangelicals” in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South* 68

<sup>82</sup> Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South* (2005) p197, 15

and economic programs, black churches continued to challenge the practices of a racist society.<sup>83</sup> Thus despite some of the massive changes in the South of the past forty years—a transformed economy, the rise of a powerful Republican party, indirect forms of racism to replace the old overt ones—scholars have imagined a remarkable religious continuity: churches utterly divided along racial lines, a protopolitical and activist black church speaking for the less powerful and an accommodated and status quo defending white church on the side of power.

These models may fit aspects of the present, though one is hard pressed to imagine that the poorer whites captured in the recent documentary *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* are pillars of the Religious Right, or that the culture of hip-hop really centers its sense of identity in the church. But the concern here is not with the past forty years but with the New South, with strata of religious life in that older world that have been obscured by the available interpretive categories. Put simply, the context of the 1960s—utter racial divisions, solidarity on either side of the color line, and a paramount concern with the politics of race relations—has been read back into the southern past too easily, and in the process a complicated older world, one in which masses of whites *and* blacks were ensnared in a crippling rural poverty, and precisely in that poverty generated a distinct religious vision, has been lost.

As the decade of the 1960s came to a close, a well-known white liberal, a member of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, a planter and historian of the South, meditated on the strange force of religion in the region. He has been quoted here and there in the historiography, and Charles Reagan Wilson made him central to a short essay, “‘God’s Project’: The Southern Civil Religion 1920-1980.” But his ideas and questions have been essentially outside the conversation of the historiography. In 1970 James McBride Dabbs completed an unusual book of

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<sup>83</sup> Albert Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University, 2001):134



history, rich in philosophical and theological musings. His focus in *Haunted by God: the Cultural and Religious Experience of the South* was not the contemporary upheaval in race relations, not the heated moral issues of the present, but what he saw as more timeless questions pertinent to human beings as such, not as racially defined.<sup>84</sup> Dabbs pondered questions of ultimate meaning, of beauty in the world, of longings for the eternal, as these had captivated and troubled people in the region. However, he concluded that the churches of the region had failed to link these “eternal questions” to the rich concrete history of the South. The “graciousness” in southern culture, for example, “was pleading to be divinized,” to be given a higher meaning, but the churches “were no help in the matter.”<sup>85</sup> The religious experience of the South was therefore tragic, because despite their significant cultural power the churches of the region did not develop and inform these burning human questions. Adapting a phrase from Flannery O’Connor, Dabbs called the region “haunted by God.” The churches perpetuated religion enough to keep people troubled and perplexed by transcendent longings, but they did not push far enough to give people satisfaction or joy.

If Dabbs’ ruminations have had little shaping influence on the historiography, the writer from whom he adapted a title and whose ideas are scattered heavily throughout *Haunted by God* has had no real interpretive force at all, other than an occasional glance. Flannery O’Connor wrote in the roughly the same years that the historical field of “southern religion” and “the black church” took shape, yet she painted a very different portrait of regional religious life. In her novels, short stories, and essays, she evoked a strange world in which a God-relation—not race relations—was the obsessive focus of her characters, in which very distinct religious ideas—not simply an emotional conversion, political conservatism, race solidarity—were at the heart of

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<sup>84</sup> Dabbs died just as he completed the book. His widow published it in 1972.

<sup>85</sup> James McBride Dabbs, *Haunted by God: The Cultural and Religious Experience of the South* (Richmond: John Knox, 1972):246

lived experience, in which “the masses” knew things that the respectable bourgeoisie did not, in which the region’s post-Civil War poverty relative to the rest of the nation was absolutely critical to the shaping of its religious history, and in which class relations—specifically the poverty of rural people relative to those in the towns and cities—were at the forefront in shaping religious sensibilities. O’Connor gets us out of the historiographical stranglehold of two monoliths, a white southern religion and a black church, through fiction grounded in a very definite time and place.<sup>86</sup> In short, class and ideas matter: in O’Connor’s fiction the rural poor wrestle with theological questions in the concrete circumstances of everyday life. (Dabbs disagreed and saw a tragic disconnect). Her “God-intoxicated hillbillies” and “God-drunk backwoodsmen” (as a reviewer for *Time* called them, mistakenly assuming that O’Connor meant to poke fun at them) reveal a different side of the South and its religious life.<sup>87</sup> Existential concerns and crises overshadow the distinctions of the social world, the content of belief is not just “there” but rather has depth and profundity, and religion does not unite whites or blacks on either side of the color line but instead has a force and depth in the lives of the poor—white and black—that it does not for the “respectable,” propertied people of the towns and cities.

“Tell that girl to quit writing about poor folks,” a man told O’Connor’s uncle shortly after the publication of her first novel in 1952. “I see poor folks every day and I get mighty tired of them, and when I read, I don’t want to see any more of them.”<sup>88</sup> As she explained on the lecture circuit in 1963, O’Connor the devout Catholic felt a close connection to the Protestant poor. Speaking of herself in third person, she remarked that “the Catholic novelist will feel a good deal more kinship with backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than he will with those

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<sup>86</sup> There is a massive scholarship on O’Connor. My purpose is not to add to it (the little that I have read), but rather to relate O’Connor’s work to the way historians understand religion in the post-Civil War South.

<sup>87</sup> *Time* February 29, 1960

<sup>88</sup> Flannery O’Connor, “The Teaching of Literature” in Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, eds. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969):131

politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development,” and in a letter she described herself as a “hillbilly Thomist.”<sup>89</sup> Her fiction reveals a carefully observant eye for the social world of the Black Belt, of Baldwin County, Georgia, where she spent her teenage years (1938-1945) in the small town of Milledgeville and her active writing years (1951-1964) on Andalusia, the family farm four miles into the countryside. From her own “postage stamp of soil,” sympathetic to the rural Protestant poor, O’Connor evoked strata of religious life other than that of the New South bourgeoisie, who, historians like Evelyn Higginbotham and Paul Harvey have revealed, were the moving forces in denominational activity and the class of people evidenced by denominational materials.<sup>90</sup> Despite admonitions like that of the annoyed local man, or misreadings like that of the *Time* reviewer, O’Connor continually made the Protestant poor of the South her central characters because, she explained in a lecture, “the mystery of existence is always showing through the texture of their ordinary lives.”<sup>91</sup> In seemingly ordinary situations like the unveiling of a new tattoo, a barn loft picnic, or feeding the hogs, her fiction depicts the poor coming to terms with that mystery.

O’Connor’s “strange southern alliance”—a woman of privilege and property, a well-read Catholic intellectual, peopling her fiction with the “unlettered” Protestant poor—is more than just an unlikely curiosity.<sup>92</sup> Seen in historical context, it is a critical sociological and theological

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<sup>89</sup> O’Connor, “The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South” (1963 lecture at Georgetown University) in Fitzgerald, ed. *Collected Works* 859; letter 5/18/55 in *Collected Works* 934

<sup>90</sup> Though Ted Ownby’s *Subduing Satan* is ostensibly about the rural South, his characters are principally New South bourgeoisie of the small towns, and “rural” in his use includes towns like Greenwood, Mississippi and Anderson, South Carolina. A person like Sam Jones may have been born in the rural South, but in his adult life was a vital force in New South urban life and hardly a spokesman for the rural poor. Ownby’s “rural” people also left extensive written memoirs and church records, and had the political clout to successfully legislate their principal reform, Prohibition: they are not the rural poor of O’Connor world, not the masses of white and black tenants, croppers, small farmers, miners, and timber workers who numbered in the millions by 1900.

<sup>91</sup> O’Connor, “Teaching of Literature” in Fitzgerald, eds. *Mystery and Manners* 133

<sup>92</sup> The phrase is Ralph Wood’s, and I am indebted to him for most of what I know about O’Connor.

judgment that prompts a significant rethinking of established notions in the historiography.

Without intending to take anything away from the pathos of race relations in the post-Civil War South, the historian can see in O'Connor's work something else that has been critical to religious life, namely, the post-Civil War South's peripheral relation to the booming national economy, and within that New South order, the marginal position of rural people. The New South movement of the 1880s and 90s was not a mirage; towns multiplied across the region, there were some sizeable cities and industrial development, particularly in textiles, and countless miles of railroad track tied southern production and consumption to national markets. Still, as Gavin Wright showed, a regional labor market marked the South as distinct from, and economically inferior to, the rest of the country.<sup>93</sup> Within the region, furthermore, the limited wealth was highly unevenly distributed. Though agriculture dominated the regional economy, and the majority of the population worked in agriculture, the bulk of the wealth produced from it flowed from the countryside into the towns and cities. There, it built elegant Victorian mansions and durable brick stores that stood in marked contrast to the simple wood of tenant shacks and small farmhouses. Jesse Ormond, a professor at Duke's Divinity School in the New South town of Durham, concerned about the wide disparity between wealth in urban and rural areas as it pertained to sustaining churches, wrote frankly that "the financial milk is drawn for the city church, though the cow is fed in the country."<sup>94</sup> Thirty years earlier, a fresh seminary graduate who had recently moved to the Georgia Black Belt lamented early signs of this disparity. "The wealthy members [of the old church] are dead, " he wrote in 1901, "and have moved to Atlanta."<sup>95</sup> Already in the 1880s, Edward Ayers finds, landowners were evacuating the

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<sup>93</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1986)

<sup>94</sup> Jesse Ormond, *The Country Church in North Carolina* (Durham: Duke University, 1931):349

<sup>95</sup> Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South* 163, 24, 62-65, 200-202

countryside, and the profits from their rural holdings funded their lives in the towns and cities of the New South. In this social order and era, no large group in the nation experienced poverty more than the masses of people, white and black, who lived and worked in the rural South.

By the 1940s, with an infusion of capital into the region, the mechanization of agriculture, and federal crop reduction programs, the structures of rural life were beginning to change drastically. Unlike the Civil Rights movement, this was a quieter and slower drama, one that began with the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1934 and continued through the 1950s, but it touched the lives of millions of people and fundamentally altered the region. O'Connor brilliantly captured the insecurities and tensions in this changing world in her 1954 story "The Displaced Person," and at Andalusia she experienced some of these changes firsthand: her mother turned the century-old cotton farm into a dairy operation, in a move that farm owners throughout the southern Piedmont were making. In demographic terms, these structural changes meant massive rural depopulation, as labor demands in the countryside began to shrink and millions of newly "displaced" black and white rural people migrated to southern and national cities in search of industrial jobs. Agriculture would continue to dominate certain parts of the South, and some small farmers continued to make a marginal living, but by 1960 the mass numbers of people who had once worked the land were vanishing. O'Connor's writings (1951-1964) stand as a document of this rural world in its time of eclipse.

These revolutionary changes are common knowledge to historians of the twentieth-century South, but the imprint of rural poverty before these changes, and the religious meaning that this poverty had, has not touched the historiography of religion in any substantive way. The hardly insubstantial pathos of poverty and marginalization has been almost completely overshadowed by the drama of race relations. O'Connor shows that in the poverty that they

shared (if not necessarily in equal measure), rural whites and blacks shared elements of a heartfelt, theologically complicated Protestantism. Her religious concern for what she called “the larger human drama in which all of us have our parts to play,” her theological sense that beneath material lack was an existential poverty that did not “have anything at all to do with money” are concerns that many, historians of religion included, may find it hard to relate to.<sup>96</sup> A moral concern for just and equitable race relations may seem far more compelling. Nevertheless, O’Connor’s theological approach opens up religious life in the South in a way that the primary tropes of the historiography have not, specifically regarding the content of belief, a God-relation as religious people’s central focus (not the ways in which religion might fortify or challenge the social order), and the myriad ways in which the “mystery” of religion shows through in the little details of everyday life.

The distinct, temporally specific social basis of the religion O’Connor portrayed was in the lives of the rural poor of the early to mid twentieth century South. But what was its ideological content? In her fiction O’Connor showed the poor coming to terms with intricately complicated theological questions. Paraphrasing her rich fiction seems like heresy, and my point is not to make an attempt at cataloguing the religious ordeals of O’Connor characters like Manley Pointer and Francis Marion Tarwater. But in her prose lectures O’Connor did make repeated reference to some of the main theological themes in rural Protestantism, and these suggestively invite historical study: a “knowledge of human limitations and...a sense of mystery,” or a paradoxical sensibility that was neither optimistic nor fatalistic but instead constituted a Protestant *via negativa*; a sense “that evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured,” or an essentially non-moralistic ethos marked by an awareness of

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<sup>96</sup> O’Connor quoted in Robert Coles, *Flannery O’Connor’s South* xviii and O’Connor, “Teaching of Literature” in Fitzgerald, eds. *Mystery and Manners* 132

perennial darkness within; a concrete, narrative manner of conveying religious ideas, or the difference between “if we have been taught only a definition of faith [or] if we have trembled with Abraham as he held the knife over Isaac;” and a belief in “essential displacement,” or a mindset in which people continually felt their incompleteness and were both troubled and comforted by the “wild ragged figure” of Jesus, who moved “from tree to tree” in people’s imaginations and motioned them to “come off into the dark,” as he did for O’Connor’s anti-preacher Hazel Motes.<sup>97</sup>

Perhaps, the intellectual thinks, this is all a rather serious romanticization, a case of a privileged, well-read writer projecting her own theological concerns onto the “unlettered” poor. Conducting extensive field research with the rural poor in the Deep South in the late 1950s and early 1960s, at the same time entranced by O’Connor’s fiction, psychiatrist Robert Coles found otherwise. He knew O’Connor for a short time, he working out of the SNCC office in Atlanta, she in the hospital there suffering through the last stages of lupus. They met through the introduction of a nurse, Ruth Ann Jackson, the daughter of black sharecroppers, a lay preacher, and grandmother to one of the children who first integrated Atlanta’s schools. Jackson felt a kinship to O’Connor because, she said, she knew from talking to her that she believed in God, and she sought to have O’Connor’s stories put on the traveling hospital bookshelf. This religiously-based sense of kinship became emblematic for Coles, and as he pursued psychological research on children’s responses to desegregation, and later research on the rural poor, he came to see that the people he was studying and the people O’Connor was writing about populated the same world. This was not just incidental. “If she’s used ‘cracker’ people...if she’s kept the rural landscape fairly near at hand, in story after story—then that is an instrumental part

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<sup>97</sup> O’Connor, “The Regional Writer” (1962 lecture to Georgia Writers’ Association) *Collected Works* 847; “The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South” *CW* 862, 859; “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” *CW* 818; *Wise Blood* in *CW* 11

of a writer's effort," Coles summarized one way of interpreting O'Connor. But, he argued, "the world she created has its own integrity."<sup>98</sup> A certain class of people and their religious obsessions were not incidental backdrops but vital to O'Connor's purpose of imaging religious drama. Her art was an evocation based on something real, and historically specific: a world of rural poverty and, as one of the rural poor told Coles, "hard, hard religion."<sup>99</sup> It was art, not just sociology, but that art was a social document of specific people with a distinct sensibility in a concrete time and place.

Of critical importance, Coles also made explicit something that O'Connor had left implicit: that rural whites *and blacks* sustained a distinct Protestant sensibility shaped by the experience of poverty. O'Connor did not, Coles pointed out, ever write about black people as her *main* characters. But through O'Connor's theological portrait of the South and its rural poor, Coles moved past the divisions of the color line to see commonalities in the mentality of "the poor"—black and white. He was first concerned with psychological effects of the color line, as exemplified in the late 50s-early 60s challenge to it, and he published his research in the acclaimed 1967 *Children in Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear*. With O'Connor's insights in mind, however, he turned from this study—one that basically confirms the historiography's central racial division in religion—to a different kind, in which class commonalities and the experience of severe poverty were the central concerns. Published in 1971 as *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers*, this study united blacks and whites in a common experience of rural poverty and a religion with themes shaped by that experience. "The mystery of existence" did show through the texture of ordinary life, and not just in fiction, Coles found. Continually he

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<sup>98</sup> Robert Coles, *Flannery O'Connor's South* 13

<sup>99</sup> Coles, *Flannery O'Connor's South* 61



listened to people who “can’t help going from ‘race relations’ and sociology to theology.”<sup>100</sup> If “unlettered,” they were hardly untheological. “We’re all in prison, all the time: we’re sinners—here by the grace of God...when we die, we either stay in prison, or we’re sprung. No one knows who goes where; only God does. You can’t get to him by telling him you’re Mr. Big, and you have more money than anyone can count in the Citizens and Southern Bank,” a white male farm worker told Coles.<sup>101</sup> “A lot of time I’ll be thinking there’s no point in going on,” a black female sharecropper confessed. “I think we’re born to be tested, and we’re always being tested around here, that’s for sure. In the same way Jesus was being tested all the time. They’d ask Him this and they’d ask Him that, and a lot of people just didn’t believe Him, and they didn’t like Him and they got Him after a while, they killed Him, and it was terrible.”<sup>102</sup>

In his 1979 Fleming Lectures in Southern History at LSU, Coles described the connections between his extensive field research and O’Connor’s artistic vision. Coles of course knew that the rural South had changed drastically, and that the changes were already very clear at the time of his field research. (A subsequent study pursued the southern rural diaspora in *The South Goes North*). O’Connor’s world was vanishing as people left the rural South and the regional economy became more fully integrated with the national economy, not merely as a periphery. But O’Connor had evoked something real and specific, and Coles himself witnessed it in the years that it was quickly fading: “I have spent years in the homes of the people who are, in certain respects, [O’Connor’s] chosen ones—the South’s impoverished, hard-praying, stubbornly enduring rural folk, of both races.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Coles, *Flannery O’Connor’s South* 32

<sup>101</sup> Published in 1980 as *Flannery O’Connor’s South*

<sup>102</sup> Coles, *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers* 594

<sup>103</sup> Coles, *Flannery O’Connor’s South* p xxx

But what categories should be used in interpreting this religious world of the poor? Two scholars have consistently sought to narrate strata of southern white religious life not captured by the Hill model, David Harrell in essays and a book (1964-1985) and Wayne Flynt in essays, a book, and a recent SHA presidential address (1981, 1998, 2004), and their models for interpreting the poor bear examination. Harrell was a critic of the Hill model even as it was taking shape, writing in 1971 of “an oversimplified view of ‘the southern church’” and that “the rich religious diversity of the section has been overlooked.”<sup>104</sup> In 1985 Harrell noted the “exploding historiography” of southern history, which was revealing significant internal class tensions and shaking up stock notions of a “solid South,” and he called for historians to “inject class tension into the study of southern religion.”<sup>105</sup> He sought to explore the religious life of the “sects,” which he saw as preservationist movements by the poor that arose in response to the modernizing New South ethos of the denominations. The Baptist-Methodist bloc was only one part of the story, and beyond sources from bourgeois denominational leaders, a substantial world of religious life opened up. Furthermore, he wrote, the idea of Baptist-Methodist hegemony and the focus on an emotional conversion experience had pigeonholed the field, such that scholars could not see the formative role of different religious ideas, or the theological diversity in the region.<sup>106</sup>

Wayne Flynt was well-versed in the literature of southern history, and this led him to see substantial disparities between the portraits of southern politics and southern religion.

“Presumably no more conservative American ever lived than the individualistic, rural, southern Evangelical,” he wrote in 1981 of a trope that continues to have currency today. “What always puzzled me about that assumption was that counties which were made up of precisely this kind

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<sup>104</sup> David Harrell, *White Sects and Black Men in the Recent South* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1971):7

<sup>105</sup> David Harrell, “Religious Pluralism: Catholics, Jews, Sectarrians” in Wilson, ed. *Religion in the South* 63

<sup>106</sup> Harrell, “Religious Pluralism” 62

of person staged the Populist revolt,” he noted, and he went on to show that after Populism’s demise significant numbers of rural Protestants were involved at the grassroots in Socialism, labor activism in the textile mills and coal mines, and in the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.<sup>107</sup> The role of Protestants in these working-class movements made blithe assertions about a solid South—politically and religiously—questionable, and their social critique demonstrated that white Protestantism had played other roles than always sanctifying the social order. As he looked at working-class politics, Flynt also sought to explore the experience of severe poverty in the rural South. Through the work of Robert Coles and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Flynt laid out a psychological model in which religion performed certain functions—providing a sense of identity, self-worth, and purpose—for poor people who did not get these things through the existing social order.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, Flynt charged that use of the most readily accessible sources (denominational publications and holdings) did not allow the rich texture of poor religious life to break through: a denominational newspaper was about as useful a source as the 1890s *New York Times* for recovering the thoughts of the rural poor—yet religious scholars had freely attributed elite views from such sources to the voiceless masses. Flynt pioneered in the use of oral histories, both his own and older ones like the Federal Writers Project life histories, as a way to circumvent source-based gaps and misinterpretations.

Harrell and Flynt have carved out important imaginative space, but Harrell’s idea of sectarianism and Flynt’s psychological model remain problematic. Harrell has consistently used the category of the “sect” to characterize the religious life of the poor.<sup>109</sup> This is a category first

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<sup>107</sup> Wayne Flynt, “One in the Spirit, Many in the Flesh: Southern Evangelicals” in David Harrell, ed. *Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism* 35; “Southern Protestantism and Reform 1890-1920” in Samuel Hill, ed. *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience*; “Religion for the Blues: Evangelicalism, Poor Whites, and the Great Depression” *Journal of Southern History* 71:1 (February 2005)

<sup>108</sup> Flynt, “One in the Spirit” 32-33; Flynt, “Religion for the Blues” 3-38

<sup>109</sup> Harrell, “The Sectional Origins of the Churches of Christ” *Journal of Southern History* 30 (August 1964); *White Sects and Black Men in the Recent South* (1971); “The South: Seedbed of Sectarianism” in Harrell, ed. *Varieties of*

articulated by the German church historian Ernst Troeltsch and later elaborated by American church historian H. Richard Niebuhr, and it is tied to the denominational model. If denominations are established, socially respectable groups that (perhaps not always consciously) provide sanction for the dominant order (“church” in Troeltsch’s original typology), sects are newer movements of the relatively marginalized that articulate a religious vision at odds with the social order. Troeltsch developed his model based on empirical research and a European context of official national churches, but Harrell brought it to the study of religion in the South. So, looking for religious pluralism in the region, Harrell sought out the smaller groups—the Churches of Christ, the Pentecostal and Holiness movements, the Cumberland Presbyterians, the Primitive Baptists, the Landmark movement among Southern Baptists—and characterized them as sects in Troeltsch’s sense. The different institutional names were, Harrell claimed, markers of substantial diversity in the region, a diversity resting on the sociological fact of class difference in the New South.

This characterization, however, rested on two dubious assumptions: that smaller groups with apparently more fringe beliefs were, *a priori*, “religions of the dispossessed;” and that the denominations (Baptist and Methodist) were unified enough such that any difference had to be manifest in institutional separation.<sup>110</sup> Closer research remains to be done as to the class composition of these groups, but evidence that Harrell himself provided questions his claim that these were religious expressions of the dispossessed poor. These groups published newspapers, established and funded colleges, and developed a functioning centralized bureaucracy. Leaders like Fort Worth minister J. Frank Norris and Little Rock minister Ben Bogard had the political clout to help swing Texas for the Republicans in 1928 (Norris) and to introduce the Anti-

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*Southern Evangelicalism* (1981); “Religious Pluralism: Catholics, Jews, and Sectarians” in Wilson, ed. *Religion in the South* (1985)

<sup>110</sup> Harrell, chapter 1, *White Sects and Black Men in the Recent South*

Evolution bill into the Arkansas legislature in the same year (Bogard). What may be evidenced here is not the religious life of the rural poor, but rather religious differences among the bourgeoisie of the towns and cities. Morgan Kousser demonstrated that the alleged “demagogues” of the early twentieth century South—Vardaman, Blease, Bilbo, and others—were not mouthpieces of the (disfranchised) rural poor, but, beneath populist rhetoric, colorful members of the propertied class.<sup>111</sup> Harrell’s sects of the “dispossessed” may turn out to be similar.

But there is already good evidence that the label of “sect” is a misnomer, one based on a typology that does not fit the experience of the rural South. This comes out in the favored sources of the scholarship, the writings of denominational elites. In 1922 the bureaucracy of the Southern Baptist Convention (the largest white denomination in the region) undertook a massive study of rural churches affiliated with the SBC.<sup>112</sup> Using more rigid definitions of “rural” than those of the US Census (places with less than 1000 people, as opposed to the Census definition of less than 2500), the surveyors found that 88.5% of all SBC churches were rural, and that these churches constituted 68% of the total SBC membership. But, despite the SBC appellation, these churches had little to do with the denominational structure: only 12.5% sent delegates to state convention meetings and only 6.3% sent delegates to the annual SBC meeting; 75.9% of rural ministers had no seminary training; 90% of rural church members had never seen a

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<sup>111</sup> J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics* 231-236

<sup>112</sup> No other denomination, white or black, undertook such an extensive survey, but field studies by sociologists and church reformers show similar practices in rural churches, white and black, throughout the region. See Victor Masters, *The Country Church in the South* (Atlanta: Home Mission Board, 1917); Edmund Brunner, *Church Life in the Rural South* (New York: G.H. Doran, 1923); Charles Hamilton and William Garnett, *The Role of the Church in Rural Community Life in Virginia* (Blacksburg: Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, 1923); Charles Hamilton and John Ellison, *The Negro Church in Rural Virginia* (Blacksburg: Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, 1930); Elizabeth Hooker, *Religion in the Highlands* (New York: Home Missions Council, 1933); Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory: A Picture of the Church Among Negroes in the Rural South* (New York: Friendship Press, 1947); Southern Rural Life Council, *The Church and Rural Community Living in the South* (1947); Ralph Felton, *These My Brethren: A Study of 570 Negro Churches and 1542 Negro Homes in the Rural South* (Madison: Drew Theological Seminary, 1950)

denominational newspaper; 73.6% of rural churches had never held any kind of denominational rally; and the vast majority of these churches (¾) held services only once a month.<sup>113</sup> In the words of a worker for the Baptist Women's Missionary Union, the rural churches were "denominationally detached."<sup>114</sup> Or, as a concerned Baptist seminary professor put it, the rural churches needed "closer touch with denominational life."<sup>115</sup>

Various historians have known about and used this study, but they have not pushed it through to its logical conclusion: the denominations were hardly unified entities. Under the "Baptist" moniker were disparate, scattered congregations: innumerable rural ones with only minimal relation to the centralized denominational authorities; fewer but larger urban ones with a much closer relation to the structure. A casual glance at SBC minutes, a denominational newspaper, or the rolls of seminary students reveals that "urban" (town or city) people were overwhelmingly the ones active in denominational life. And as some of these urban people became involved in missionary evangelizing to the rural poor through the SBC's Home Mission Board, they sent back harsh indictments of a different phenomenon at work in the countryside. Working among white tenants in eastern North Carolina, a missionary wrote with alarm that she had found "stories of immorality and ignorance that would parallel those told by foreign missionaries occurring all around us."<sup>116</sup> A minister in a Virginia piedmont town wrote that the rural Baptist churches suffered from an appalling "absence of real religion."<sup>117</sup> The denominations were not unified entities speaking in one voice, and stock generalizations about "Baptist" opinion based on newspapers that few rural people read, on meetings that few rural people attended, and on seminary education that few rural preachers had need to be reined in. As

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<sup>113</sup> *Southern Baptist Convention Handbook 1923* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1923)

<sup>114</sup> *Religious Herald* 3/10/38

<sup>115</sup> J.W. Jent, *The Challenge of the Country Church* (Nashville: Home Mission Board, 1924):151

<sup>116</sup> Mary Livermore, "Mission Work Among Backward People" *Our Home Field* (October 1911)

<sup>117</sup> C.A. Woodson, "Our Country Churches" *Our Home Field* (June 1913)

concerned denominational workers continually found, local rural congregations had a life of their own with little relation to centralized authority. If this basic point is conceded, then it becomes clear that one need not look to smaller religious groups (sects) for religious variation and difference. One need merely look at local churches.

Harrell's work on the sects did establish the idea that there might be pluralism in regional religious life, but scholars continue to define this pluralism within the Troeltsch model—new, smaller, and less established groups are *a priori* movements of the poor in response to modernizing denominations.<sup>118</sup> Of the Church of God, a white Pentecostal group that began to take shape in the 1890s, Mickey Crews wrote that it was a rejection of “respectable churches,” of “the cold formalism and spiritual leanness of Baptist and Methodist churches.”<sup>119</sup> William Montgomery argued that in the same decade, as “middle-class values took root in black society, permeated the church, and made it even more conservative and accommodationist,” Holiness and Pentecostal groups began to multiply.<sup>120</sup> However, denominational elites may have preached a middle-class message of respectability and formalism, as a number of historians have documented, but rural Baptist and Methodist churches, if they heard this message at all, did not practice it, as denominational leaders found and as their concerned field reports note. Put in another way, if we look at Baptists and Methodists on the local level, and not as monoliths articulated by elites, there was no respectability or formalism to react to. Explanations for the appeal of the new groups need to be located elsewhere. Similarly, conceding Harrell's claim for regional religious pluralism, Samuel Hill wrote his own study of smaller religious groups. He

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<sup>118</sup> See Mickey Crews, “Populistic Religion: The Social Origins of the Church of God” in Wilson, ed. *Cultural Perspectives on the American South, Volume 5: Religion*; Samuel Hill, *One Name But Several Faces: Variety in Popular Christian Denominations in Southern History* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1996); Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South* 88-96; Daniel Woods, “The Royal Telephone: Early Pentecostalism in the South and the Enthusiastic Practice of Prayer” in Schweiger and Mathews, eds. *Religion in the American South*; Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming* 126-148

<sup>119</sup> Crews, “Populistic Religion” 11, 8

<sup>120</sup> Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree* 336

concluded with this assessment: “as the [Baptist] heritage underwent modernization, it left behind the poorer classes...thus inviting the rise of the new sectarian Spirit bodies.”<sup>121</sup> But “the Baptist heritage” was not a uniform entity, and if denominational elites sought modernization, they did not “leave behind” the poor to seek refuge elsewhere, because (as they themselves lamented) they had little control over the religious life of the poor. Hardly left behind in their Baptist tradition, massive numbers of the poor continued to go to *their own* local, rural Baptist churches.

Without explicitly using the category of the “sect,” other scholars have located difference in more remote areas in the South, particularly Appalachia.<sup>122</sup> Or, informed by the rich literature in European history, Charles Reagan Wilson used the category of “popular religion” in his explorations of cultural artifacts, defining it as “mostly outside formal church institutions, transmitted through nonecclesiastical channels,” or “the religion of the masses, of the people, as distinct from that of the theologians, preachers, and institutions.”<sup>123</sup> Both approaches—location of difference in distinct remote areas, or outside official institutions—rest, like the “sect” category, on the questionable assumption that denominational elites managed to put their stamp on the life of the various churches sharing the same denominational name. In the European context in which Troeltsch developed his typology, and in which historians originated the idea of “popular religion,” this may be appropriate. With official state churches in which every citizen is a member, difference must be located in illegal dissident groups, or in remote regions where the power of the state, and state church, is weak. The post-Revolutionary American context is of

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<sup>121</sup> Hill, *One Name But Several Faces* 109

<sup>122</sup> Wayne Flynt, “Southern Baptists and Appalachia: A Case Study of Modernization and Community” *CrossRoads: A Journal of Southern Culture* 2 (Fall 1993-Winter 1994); Paul Harvey, “The Ideal of Professionalism and the White Southern Baptist Ministry 1870-1920” *Religion and American Culture* 5:1 (Winter 1995); Charles Lippy, “Tactics for Survival: Religious Minorities” and Samuel Hill, “The Peripheral South: Florida and Appalachia” in Wilson and Silk, eds. *Religion and Public Life in the South*

<sup>123</sup> Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie* xvi, 175



course different, though questions of hegemony in a cultural sense are still pertinent. But, the evidence from concerned denominational elites, and the evidence from rural people, indicate that the rural poor had their own space, a place for religious difference in their own local churches. These were definitely “institutions,” but institutions shaped by local life far more than by centralized authority. They were located not just in a discrete remote area like Appalachia, but throughout the southern countryside, which the majority of the propertied had evacuated in the move to town and city. The locus of the religion of the rural southern poor that O’Connor and Coles evoked was the innumerable rural churches—Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Holiness-Pentecostal—of the region, some of which, like long-abandoned tenant shacks, may still be seen in varying stages of use or decay. The religion of the rural poor was not a few fringe groups, nor an un-institutional religion, but rather a religious sensibility that rural people—a significant portion of the southern population—perpetuated through local institutions that they controlled, their churches. As O’Connor and Coles argue, the religion cultivated in these churches went out from those sacred spaces to inform everyday life-in-the-world.

Or did it? In his attempt to recover the religious life of the southern poor, Harrell attributed to them a distinct theology. But it was primarily based on *a priori* assumptions about the nature of sects, without extensive documentation. The sects, Harrell wrote, were conservative, even reactionary, movements of marginalized people who felt left behind by the modernizing of the denominations. Surveying the various sectarian groups, he argued that “in each case the conservative movements won wide support among the poor and farmers and retarded the growth of liberalism.”<sup>124</sup> The central “conservative” elements of the sectarian groups were exclusivity and otherworldliness, and the appeal of these to “the dispossessed” was clear. Exclusivity, or the fact that (in the words of a sociologist he quoted) “in the life style of the

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<sup>124</sup> Harrell, “The Evolution of Plain-Folk Religion in the South, 1835-1920” in Samuel Hill, ed. *Varieties* 36

sectarian the religious group appears to be his most meaningful association,” gave people on the margins a sense of identity, over and against the categories of the social order. And the central theological tenet, “a message combining rejection of this world and the centering of man’s hopes in the next” codified frustrated longings, for believers in this message found solace in the idea that “one day the last would be first.”<sup>125</sup> The bleak hopelessness of the present found release in otherworldly fixations. Or, as Harrell put it critically, “these escapist and narcotic ideas made sense to destitute southerners.”<sup>126</sup>

Aware of sporadic political activism by the rural Protestant poor, Wayne Flynt agreed with Harrell that the dominant tone of their religion was not engaged activism but otherworldly longing: “anticipation of heaven replaced the hopelessness of the present world.”<sup>127</sup> Yet in his recent SHA presidential address, Flynt moved past Harrell’s negative conclusions and sought to show that the rural Protestant message was not just an escapist narcotic; rather, it had very real meaning for people in their present everyday lives. Scholars must look to “the interior world of social coherence and cosmic purpose,” and there they would see that the psychological functions of rural religion, such as “self-worth...a sense of community, hope in a world of adversity, ultimate vindication in a world of powerlessness, emotional release in a world of drab routine,” were basic human needs.<sup>128</sup> This was an attempt to find value in a form of religion that many academics seem prone to dismiss, and it was of a piece with Flynt’s concern to honor, as his 1979 monograph put it, *Dixie’s Forgotten People: The South’s Poor Whites*.

The idea of psychological functionality shares similar features to the sociological functional model of “the black church” (see above). It is also similar to the tool metaphor that a

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<sup>125</sup> Harrell, “The Evolution” 43

<sup>126</sup> Harrell, “The South: Seedbed of Sectarianism” in Harrell, ed. *Varieties* 54

<sup>127</sup> Flynt, “One in the Spirit, Many in the Flesh” in Harrell, ed. *Varieties* 32

<sup>128</sup> Flynt, “Religion for the Blues” *JSH* 7

variety of historians sympathetic to the poor have employed to describe how working class activists “used” religious language and practices to express something else, their politics. In this “tool” approach, religion becomes historically significant insofar as it informs or articulates what for us is the arena of the real—politics, or the power relations of class, race, and gender.<sup>129</sup> In his address Flynt used this tool model to characterize the religion he saw at work in letters to Roosevelt and poor white support for the New Deal. However, he saw this political turn as a minority element in poor white religion, and in characterizing the dominant element, he used a psychological model like the “semi-involuntary” one. In a context of “abuse, defeat, and [the] powerlessness of a life full of pain,” stripped of the franchise, seeing little reward for their labor, ridiculed as “trash” and “shiftless,” poor whites realized in their religion the aspirations that most people realize through the normative workings of society.<sup>130</sup> In the separate space of their own churches, the rural poor found “a sense of dignity, self-worth, and promise of future vindication.”<sup>131</sup> Theirs was a “religion for the blues,” and their blues were certainly accentuated in the crisis years of the 1930s.

The central problem with this model, in Flynt’s application of it to Depression-era poor whites and as used more generally in studies of the working class, is that it frames poor people’s religion in a manner that strips it of its cultural specificity, and casts it in terms amenable to a normative conception of society (that it “works” for most people most of the time).<sup>132</sup> Without getting into the philosophically contentious issue of universals, one may say that certain human longings for self-worth, community, and justice seem to have wide scope. But are these the

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<sup>129</sup> See, for example, Glenda Gilmore’s treatment in *Gender and Jim Crow*.

<sup>130</sup> Flynt, “Religion for the Blues” *JSH* 38. For this model as a framework for interpreting rural black churches, see Lois Myers and Rebecca Sharpless, “‘Of the Least and the Most:’ The African American Rural Church” in Douglas Hurt, ed. *African American Life in the Rural South 1900-1950* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2003)

<sup>131</sup> Flynt, “Religion for the Blues” 11

<sup>132</sup> For other instances of psychological or sociological functionalism, see Jacquelyn Hall et al, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* and I.A. Newby, *Plain Folk in the New South: Social Change and Cultural Persistence 1880-1915*.

“real” phenomena at work when people invoke Jesus, the church, forgiveness and judgment? In his sensitive, nuanced concluding chapter of *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers*—also published as an essay titled “God and the Rural Poor”—Robert Coles sought to express and explore the psychological power of rural religion, but he was careful not to reduce it to something that could be thoroughly analyzed and thereby co-opted through the imaginative world of mid-twentieth century psychology. Even the sympathetic observer ran a danger of “a kind of sympathy that stubbornly and even arrogantly dwells upon exteriors,” on how the poor lack this and that and so compensate for it in their religion.<sup>133</sup> But the rural poor he spent years with told him of their substantial inner lives, and they did so through the use of very specific religious images and stories. To say that what they were “really” talking about—as Coles was careful not to do—were human phenomena to which all of us can relate is to deny the possibility that they might have their own vision not easily co-opted by our normative assumptions. Furthermore, such a strategy reduces a theological vision to a psychological one couched in incidental religious garb, in a bad display of historical presentism.

In the coal country of eastern Kentucky, Coles sat at table with an ex-miner, a man who had been badly injured on the job and struggled now to live off his small farm. Over cornbread, pork, and coffee, Coles tried to make small talk about the preacher’s nice new car, then felt upbraided as the man launched into a long meditation. He talked about injustice in the mines, the well-paid company-provided minister, and of his father: “I’ll wonder a lot about God, and if He meant for us to get near Him by going to church and listening to ministers...the truth is that the mine owners are sinners, every one of them, for the way they treat us and sit back and let us get killed in those mines—while they take in the fat profits and send them up to Pittsburgh and New York and wherever the money goes, everywhere but here in Kentucky...My father believed in

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<sup>133</sup> Robert Coles, *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers* 617

God. He knew how to read the Bible; that's all he knew how to read or ever did read. He could recite passages by heart. He'd do that in one breath, and then he'd tell us that a lot of ministers are holding the hands of the mine owners and getting paid to do nothing much except tell us to be quiet and law-abiding. My father said that even so we should go to church, and the church belongs to God, and He'll have His bad ministers, like there are bad in every type of person. He was betrayed by one of His disciples, way back there, and it still happens..."<sup>134</sup> These are very culturally specific ideas, and it seems theft to me—cultural theft—to say that what this man really was talking about were the power relations of coal mining life or his need to preserve a sense of autonomy in the face of company hegemony. These elements are there, but they are articulated through a certain very specific sensibility—a Protestantism of the poor—that cannot be reduced to just a psychological compensation or a protopolitical preparation. It is a vision that includes some elements amenable to the operating categories of contemporary historians, and some not. To render the latter wholly in terms of the former, however well-meaning the intent, is to deny substantive difference of sensibility.

O'Connor's backwoods prophet Mason Tarwater fumes about his nephew's denial of his religious sensibility. The nephew, a schoolteacher and amateur psychologist, asked the old Tarwater numerous questions about his life, and he then wrote a scholarly article about him. What Tarwater saw of the article appalled him: " 'His fixation of being called by the Lord had its origin in insecurity. He needed the assurance of a call, and so he called himself.' 'Called myself!' the old man would hiss, 'called myself!' This so enraged him that half the time he could do nothing but repeat it. 'Called myself. I called myself. I, Mason Tarwater, called myself! Called myself to be beaten and tied up. Called myself to be spit on and snickered at. Called

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<sup>134</sup> Coles, *Migrants* 599-603

myself to be struck down in my pride. Called myself to be torn by the Lord's eye...'"<sup>135</sup> Surely O'Connor was having somewhat of her own say here too, and in this Tarwater's fulminations can become an interpretive warning about reducing religion to "a department of sociology or culture or personality development."

We need space in our historical literature for the Mason Tarwaters of the South, for the hard-pressed and articulate older rural people that Robert Coles listened to, for the New South communities of faith that created the strange religious music of the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack or the *Goodbye, Babylon* boxed set, songs like "O Death" and "Po' Lazarus." An occasional glance or nod, the idea that such religion was a minor phenomenon of the periphery, won't do—though in a sense, it was very much a religion of the periphery, articulated and practiced by a large class of people on the economic margins. Dominating the historiography and its focus on race relations are issues of power, but we need a serious place for thinking about how power can work in other ways, in terms of severe poverty and economic confinement. It needs to be reemphasized that in the New South era, from the end of Reconstruction to the mid-twentieth century transformations, no large group of people in the national economy experienced poverty more than masses of southern rural people—white and black. Periodically over the course of the twentieth century, outsiders have looked to precisely such people as an American "folk." The religion of these "folk," cultivated in their own local churches, deserves rigorous historical examination. But we need open imaginations, not prior assumptions about its character or functions. We need to maintain a sense that some elements may be quite foreign, that the religious sensibility of the poor might actually tell us something we don't already know. We should be on guard for traces in ourselves of the spirit of Tarwater's nephew. "Uncle," the schoolteacher/amateur psychologist would say with a dismissive shake of the head, "you're a

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<sup>135</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) in *Collected Works* 341-342

type that's almost extinct." Instead, we should try to listen carefully to voices from what music critic Greil Marcus, in his meditations on the music of the southern "folk," calls "old, weird America."<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Owl, 1997):89

## CHAPTER 3

### “JESUS WAS OUR SAVIOR—COTTON WAS OUR KING”

This chapter puts a human face on rural poverty through glimpses of the Cash family in the years of Johnny’s youth, 1932 to 1950. It contextualizes their life, showing that they experienced a number of things common to countless rural families. The first half of this chapter describes their poverty in a socioeconomic sense, and the second half explores the structural ways in which poverty infused their religious practice. This is not an argument that socioeconomics is the base and religion merely the superstructure. Rather, I am reacting to a dominant pattern in religious history that abstracts religious life from the more tangible things that historians usually study. The Protestantism that was locally nurtured and sustained did substantially engage with basic phenomena in the lives of the poor—fragility, limitation, injustice, ridicule—but narrating religious life apart from material life misses this dynamic. It also artificially severs religious life from material life, despite their inextricability in actual lived experience. Here I discuss material life and religious life in sequence for the sake of clarity, but the chapter should function as a coherent whole.<sup>1</sup>

J.R. Cash was born into a specific kind of rural poverty—landlessness—which had been pulling in more and more people for fifty years before his birth February 26, 1932 to sharecroppers Ray and Carrie Cash, in a shotgun shack in the Crossroads community of Cleveland County, Arkansas. Such landlord-provided shacks for their landless laborers—tenants and sharecroppers—were ubiquitous throughout the region, densely dotting the landscape and

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<sup>1</sup> The chapter’s title comes from a Billy Joe Shaver song that Cash recorded in 1975 and used for the title of a chapter in his autobiography *Man in Black*. It captures the intertwining of material and religious life.



serving as housing for several million families, white and black, who together constituted about a third of the region's population. Almost always wooden and unpainted, the omnipresent shack was a striking contrast to the elaborately painted Victorian wood or the newer durable, stable brick of houses in the region's cities and towns, and the typical absence of flowers or shrubbery around the shack signified the instability and mobility that pervaded the lives of the rural landless.

Ray and Carrie had both been born into small landowning families in Cleveland County, but, as was the pattern throughout the region in the early twentieth century, they suffered a humiliating downward mobility. Ray's father William was a farmer and Baptist preacher and Carrie's father John was a small farmer and Methodist song leader, but Ray and Carrie's own children were born into a world of increasing landlessness: in 1890 73% of Cleveland County farmers owned the land they worked; by 1930 only 47% did.<sup>2</sup> The downward slope between small farmer and landless tenant or cropper was a slippery one, and in the region's cash scarce, extortionate credit economy there were few safety nets for misfortune.

The Tenge family that James Agee lived with in the summer of 1936—sharecroppers in Hale County, Alabama (77% tenancy in 1930) whose faces stare back at the viewer of Walker Evans' photographs—were at one time, Agee discovered, "almost prosperous." They owned ten cows and lived near a stream with plenty of fish. Hoping to gain greater bargaining power with his landlord, Tenge bought two young mules on a credit of \$400. But one of the mules died before it had even been worked for its first crop year, and a downward spiral began: "the other died the year after; against his fear, amounting to full horror, of sinking to the half-crop level

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<sup>2</sup> Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on the Statistics of Agriculture in the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890 Volume 10* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895):123; United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Agriculture, Volume 2 Part 2* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1932):1137

where nothing is owned, [Tengle] went into debt for other, inferior mules; his cows went one by one into debts and desperate exchanges and by sickness; he got congestive chills; his wife got pellagra; a number of his children died; he got appendicitis and lay for days under the ice cap; his wife's pellagra got into her brain." For every year of the decade 1926-1936, Agee found, "they have not cleared or had any hope of clearing a cent at the end of the year."<sup>3</sup> Of the painful lot of tenants and croppers like the Tengles or his own family, novelist Harry Crews, who came of age in the 30s and 40s in the tobacco lands of Bacon County, Georgia (58% tenancy in 1930), wrote that "the world that circumscribed the people I come from had so little margin for error, for bad luck, that when something went wrong, it almost always brought something else down with it."<sup>4</sup>

How exactly Ray and Carrie did not come to own any of the land that their parents had held is unclear, but Ray, after three years in the Army which took him to Mexico and France, returned to Cleveland County at an inauspicious time. The year of their marriage, 1920, was certainly a forbidding time to try to acquire land and start a family of their own. Cotton, the principal cash crop of Cleveland County and much of the Deep South, had fallen drastically in price from high levels during the First World War, and rates of tenancy, which had slowed some from the crisis years of the 1880s and 90s, shot drastically up, especially so in the newer cotton lands of the Census' West South Central region (Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas). There they jumped 18% during the decade of the 1920s, such that by 1930 62.3% of farmers held no land, whereas in the South as a whole, 55% of farmers were tenants as of 1930.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* 118-119. In the text Agee gave the three families pseudonyms to protect their identity; I have given their actual name. Statistics on tenancy rates from [www.fisher.lib.virginia.edu](http://www.fisher.lib.virginia.edu)

<sup>4</sup> Harry Crews, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978): 40. Statistics on tenancy rates from [www.fisher.lib.virginia.edu](http://www.fisher.lib.virginia.edu)

<sup>5</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* 118

Sharecroppers like the Cashes struggled not just against low crop prices, exorbitant credit terms, and fear of downward mobility, but also against a dominant culture that imagined their landlessness as a badge of inferiority. In a 1909 article in the Baptist periodical *Our Home Field*, white minister John E. White—a prohibitionist, denominational college president, and pastor in the New South city of Atlanta—summarized the regional population as “twelve million strong” and “eighteen million weak.” The twelve million strong were white propertyowners, who as a class “stand for Christian civilization,” who “own the property and plan the progress of the South.” On the other hand were some five million landless whites “who are not lifted to a safe level of civilization,” some three million “isolated” white small farmers in the Appalachians, and some ten million blacks—propertyowning or not—whose race rendered them beneath the level of Christian civilization. It was a dangerous situation, White warned, for numbers alone indicated a growing social threat of “eighteen million undrilled, undeveloped, uninstructed, raw recruits of civilization.”<sup>6</sup> The ranks of the “backward people of the South” were increasing.

White’s fusion of propertyowning and Christianity, or the sense that owning land was both the foundation for moral-religious development *and* a marker of virtuous habits like thrift and enterprise, was voiced over and over again in subsequent decades.<sup>7</sup> Howard Kester, a minister and Christian Socialist who became an organizer and publicist for the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in the mid-thirties, reported it as a regional commonplace that “every Sunday a thousand pulpiteers and Sunday School teachers thunder, ‘The home is the foundation of civilization and the mother’s place is in the home.’”<sup>8</sup> “We cannot often enough repeat the truth that civilization is rooted and grounded in the home-owning, home-loving, home-defending

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<sup>6</sup> John E. White, “The Backward People of the South” *Our Home Field* May 1909

<sup>7</sup> For the post-Civil War origins of this idea, that lack of upward mobility in economics marked a deficiency of character, see Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2005)

<sup>8</sup> Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1936):25

instincts,” professor L.G. Wilson echoed in a 1922 study for the North Carolina Extension Service, *The Church and Landless Men*. But he warned, “for the last twenty years we have seen industrious, thrifty, ambitious farmers leaving the country and moving into town for the school, church, and other social advantages...When these thrifty farmers move out they leave renters and share-croppers in possession of the country church and its activities, and soon the church and Sunday school pass out of existence.”<sup>9</sup> If people failed to acquire land, it was due to their own moral failings—lack of industry, thrift, and ambition. Such immoral people were thus incapable of perpetuating the twin pillars of the social order: the school and the church. “It must be true that religious interest decreases as tenancy increases,” Duke Divinity School professor Jesse Ormond reasoned in his 1930 study *The Country Church in North Carolina*.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, Howard professor and founder of Black History Month Carter Woodson articulated a view of the landless held by a rising class of black urbanites in his 1930 study *The Rural Negro*: “this class of mentally and spiritually undeveloped people, then, whether whites or blacks, necessarily show evidences of evil habits, irreligion, and lawlessness.”<sup>11</sup>

Woodson’s statement made explicit something that was implicit in John White’s 1909 article: that millions of whites were joining millions of blacks in landlessness throughout the early twentieth century. The regional economy which emerged in the wake of the Civil War was capital-scare, and with the defeat of Populism, what capital there was in the region was firmly secured in the hands of large landowners and merchants. In the absence of a fully functioning cash economy, uncertain future crop prices became collateral for loans that farm families took

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<sup>9</sup> L.G. Wilson, *The Church and Landless Men* (Raleigh: Extension Service, 1922):13,9

<sup>10</sup> Jesse Ormond, *The Country Church in North Carolina* 338

<sup>11</sup> Carter Woodson, *The Rural Negro* 46. For other examples of this mentality, see Peter Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* 63-69; Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* 185-229; Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Orbis, 1998):169-170

out for basic supplies (non-home-produced foodstuffs like coffee, flour, and sugar; a new mule; a new set of clothes, etc.) As this credit system—the “crop lien system”—actually developed and operated, lenders charged high interest rates for items bought on credit (anywhere from 10 to 60%) and at “settling time” after the harvest, the proceeds from sale of the crop often did not repay the debt.<sup>12</sup> Across the region, countless farm families both white and black sank deeper into debt at every settling time. Many white small farmers lost their small landholdings in payment for their accumulated debts, and thus experienced a debilitating downward mobility, from landowning to landlessness. In terms of economic status they came to resemble most black farmers, who since the bitter politics of Reconstruction had struggled to acquire land but remained a largely landless group.<sup>13</sup> “As the row-crop South expanded,” Jack Temple Kirby writes of the increased cash crop world of the New South, “life and labor for white families came increasingly to resemble the sort of freedom blacks had found” in the wake of emancipation. “By 1930 the margin separating the lives of poor rural folks, black and white, was narrow.”<sup>14</sup>

This narrow separation between the economic lot of poor white and poor black gave a heightened intensity to propertied whites’ evaluations of poor whites. Simply put, the regional presence of millions of poor whites disturbed the ideology of white supremacy. In Indianola, Mississippi in the rich Delta lands, Yale sociologist Leonard Doob found in the mid-30s that white townspeople “readily admit that ‘rednecks’ or ‘peckerwoods’...are nuisances and a disgrace to the white race.” “As a class they are despised,” he found, and “the adjectives applied

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<sup>12</sup> For interest rates, see Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South* 92, Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South*: 112; Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978):22

<sup>13</sup> This was the overall regional trend. Some landless whites and blacks did acquire small farms, in contrast to the regional pattern. See, for example, Theodore Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1974) for the story of a black sharecropper who became a small farmer.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987):155-156. For a contemporaneous statement of the same phenomenon, see Paul Terry and Verner Sims, *They Live on the Land: Life in an Open-Country Southern Community* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1993 [1940])42-43

to them are the same used to refer to the Negro caste: shiftless, unreliable, dishonest, etc... 'rednecks' are considered stubborn; it is acknowledged that they resemble Negroes in every indecent, immoral respect."<sup>15</sup> Georgia Presbyterian minister Ira Caldwell wrote of landless whites (which his son Erskine was soon to depict in grotesque form in *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre*) in a 1930 article for the national journal *Eugenics*. "We have hidden away in the social order," he warned, "a vast number of people who are a source of weakness rather than strength," and, lest the numbers of poor whites increase even more, he called for southern state legislatures to extend their program of sterilization of poor white women and men.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most enduring propertied description of landless whites and blacks came from the skillful pen of William Alexander Percy. Percy owned a large (3343 acre) cotton plantation in the Mississippi Delta, Trail Lake, but like so many large landlords he lived in and enjoyed the social life of a town, Greenville, Mississippi, where his imposing house was a kind of waystation for poets, sociologists, and artists. Toward his 589 black tenants Percy expressed a paternalistic view in his 1941 memoir. "I watch the limber-jointed, oily-black, well-fed, decently clothed peasants on Trail Lake and feel sorry for the telephone girls, the clerks in chain stores, the office help, the unskilled laborers everywhere." Imaginatively infantilizing blacks was critical to Percy's idea that the plantation offered a "as humane, just, self-respecting, and cheerful a method of earning a living as human beings are likely to devise," else the radical disparities between his own life and that of his tenants would appear problematic. Surely a different problem for the ideology of white supremacy, the presence of large numbers of whites

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<sup>15</sup> Leonard Doob, "Poor Whites: A Frustrated Class" Appendix I in John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (New Haven: Yale University, 1937):447,455

<sup>16</sup> Ira Caldwell, *The Bunglers* (New Haven: Galton, 1930):26. Southern state hospitals sterilized thousands of poor whites in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In its 1927 decision in *Buck v Bell*, the US Supreme Court upheld this practice because it was directed, in Oliver Wendell Holmes' words, at a "shiftless, ignorant, and worthless class of antisocial whites of the South." In the 1950s and 60s the practice shifted to target rural black women. See *The Lynchburg Story* (New York: Filmmakers Library, 1993) and Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1999):21-22

whose economic condition scarcely differed from that of blacks, explained Percy's rage against poor whites: "The present breed is probably the most unprepossessing on the broad face of the ill-populated earth...I can forgive them as the Lord God forgives, but admire them, trust them, love them—never." Percy recalled watching a crowd of poor whites, "ill-dressed, surly...unintelligent and slinking...They were the sort of people that lynch Negroes, that mistake hoodlumism for wit, and cunning for intelligence, that attend revivals and fight and fornicate in the bushes afterward."<sup>17</sup>

Such visceral repulsion of propertied white toward poor white may lie behind a distinct Cash family memory. In the years from 1920 to 1935 Ray and Carrie and their children periodically lived as tenants on the land of Ray's oldest brother Dave. Dave was a significant landowner in Cleveland County and, family tradition records, a cruel and harsh man who hated his youngest brother.<sup>18</sup> He may have inherited the family land, but it was likely through his hardness that he increased his holdings and became active in local politics—even as his younger brother was unable to pay the poll tax.<sup>19</sup> Certainly Dave gave Ray humiliating varieties of labor to supplement cotton production. In 1934 when the Agricultural Adjustment Act mandated livestock reduction as a way to raise prices, Ray was given a shotgun and a hundred shells to slaughter fifty of the weakest cattle on Dave's farm. He used only fifty shots, but became badly nauseous and had to struggle to finish the killing. Afterwards, he told biographer Christopher Wren, "I could see those scrawny cows with their heads hanging down and their eyes just looking at me," and he had nightmares of the mass carnage.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (New York: Knopf, 1941): 280,20,149

<sup>18</sup> Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash: The Biography* 4-9

<sup>19</sup> Streissguth 7

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too: The Life of Johnny Cash* 33-34

It was on the land of Dave Cash that J.R.'s earliest memory comes into focus. In 34-35 Ray and Carrie Cash and their four children were sharecropping for Dave and renting a three-room shack near the Cotton Belt railroad line. In addition to work like livestock slaughter, Ray sought out temporary cash-paying jobs in the area and in neighboring states. To travel to such work he would illegally hop trains and hobo with other men. Two-year-old J.R. would watch from the window of the shack as trains would begin to slow as they neared the trading town and railroad depot of Kingsland. As they slowed rough-looking men would stealthily jump off and roll down from the railroad bed, so as to elude the railroad detectives. The gaggle of men would scatter in all directions, but one would walk straight towards the shack, and as he got closer J.R. could see that Daddy had made it home again.<sup>21</sup>

The hobo is an enduring image from the 1930s, memorialized in songs like Jimmie Rodgers' 1928 "Waiting for a Train" and in Woody Guthrie's 1943 memoir *Bound for Glory*. In his own music Cash commemorated the hobo, in his 1957 song "Give My Love to Rose," on the cover of the 1964 album *Orange Blossom Special* where he was pictured as a hobo, and in the 1974 historical television drama *Ridin' the Rails*, where he sang Jack Routh's elegant "Crystal Chandeliers and Burgundy" to a boxcar of men. There is real-world experience behind such art, but the hobo is also a figure emblematic of the mobility and uncertain future facing landless families like the Cashes. In the economy of the New South, the most typical moving entity was the landless family—not solitary men. From 1920 to 1935 Ray and Carrie moved their children at least three times in Cleveland and neighboring Dallas counties in search of better laboring conditions; the move in 1932 to Dave Cash's seems to have been a last resort in the face of worsening Depression conditions.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 5-6

<sup>22</sup> Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too* 29



The power to move from farm to farm or plantation to plantation was a central method by which the landless sought to bargain with landlords, and rates of mobility were high throughout the region.<sup>23</sup> Moving, or the threat of moving, indicates that the landless understood their situation and sought to better it within a world of limited options. But in the dominant culture frequent mobility was yet another badge of inferiority. “What is the chance to socialize, civilize, or Christianize a landless, homeless people, in any community or country, state or nation?” L.G. Wilson queried. “What can be done for people who move from pillar to post...who lack identity with the community in which they live, who feel little or no responsibility for law and order, who lack a proprietary interest in schools and churches and other agencies of progress and prosperity...The landless have no stake in the land.”<sup>24</sup> Carter Woodson argued that tenancy was “the worst evil from which the South has to suffer,” because it had “given rise to a transitory, migratory class which has no permanent attachment to and no abiding interest in the communities in which they sojourn...The agencies like the school and the church under such circumstances cannot carry out any constructive program where there is no permanent home life.”<sup>25</sup> He concluded that it was “increasingly difficult to keep up the interest of the shifting tenants in serious matters like things of the spirit. As they have no fixed abode they restrict their interest largely to the immediate necessities of life.”<sup>26</sup>

In this narrative, the mobility of the landless meant that they were not really members of society; they were beyond the reach of socializing and civilizing institutions. In the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1914 banker J.T. Holleman described a transient landless class who lived like beasts: “every two years...they move from one place to another. They build no homes, they live

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<sup>23</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South* 90-98

<sup>24</sup> L.G. Wilson, *The Church and Landless Men* 7

<sup>25</sup> Carter Woodson, *The Rural Negro* 46

<sup>26</sup> Woodson 64

in rude huts, no flowers about their dwellings, no trees to shade them from the sun, consumed by the summer's heat and the winter's cold, no lawns about their houses, no garden fences, and with the accursed cotton plant crowding the very threshold of their rude dwellings."<sup>27</sup> The Commission on Interracial Cooperation, a loose coalition of white and black church leaders and reformers, argued in a 1937 report that "generally speaking, farm tenants and wage hands do not participate in community affairs," and the report included a telling anecdote. A minister was driving down the road with a landowner and suggested that the church hold revival services. "We don't need any," the owner said, "all the people here are in the church." The minister asked, "how about those white men in overalls back up there at the last house?" "Those are just croppers," the owner said.<sup>28</sup> In 1947 the Southern Rural Life Council, an interracial group of academics centered in the Nashville universities, succinctly summarized the dominant sensibility of a generation when they concluded, "poor people make poor churches and communities."<sup>29</sup>

Or, when observers did credit poor people with the ability to sustain institutional churches, they found the religion therein to be badly impoverished in its own way, an extreme display of emotion in poor taste. From the countryside in the 1910s white Baptist home missionaries sent in reports of poor people who did not understand "a well-rounded Christian life," whose "retarded churches of Christ" needed expert-led reform and moral guidance.<sup>30</sup> In his extensive 1923 study of rural white and black churches, Edmund Brunner argued that "so many of the country ministers are themselves untrained men. They have experienced religion emotionally and in no other way; and their message is too often a repetition of their personal

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<sup>27</sup> *Atlanta Constitution* 9/27/14, quoted in Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* 24

<sup>28</sup> Commission on Interracial Cooperation, *The South's Landless Farmers* (Atlanta: Commission on Interracial Cooperation, 1937):n.p.

<sup>29</sup> Southern Rural Life Council, *The Church and Rural Community Living in the South* 10

<sup>30</sup> *Our Home Field* July 1911, August 1916

emotional experience and little else.” These emotion-driven men had “caused the paralysis of the southern rural church,” Brunner concluded.<sup>31</sup>

In 1930 Ira Caldwell wrote of his own experiences in the churches of poor whites: “each time the preacher, while beating the air, has given a picture of a God that no intelligent being could worship. And in addition to outlining a God with the earmarks of heathenism, the preacher has only glorified mediocrity.”<sup>32</sup> His son Erskine painted grotesque pictures of an emotional and sexualized poor white religion in his novels *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God’s Little Acre* (1933). In his 1937 collaboration with photographer Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, Caldwell depicted the religion of rural whites and blacks as “a release and escape,” a “burlesque of religion,” and he wrote that in their churches the rural poor “intoxicate themselves with a primitive form of religious frenzy that has its closest counterpart in alcoholic drunkenness.”<sup>33</sup> While Carter Woodson’s arguments about tenant irreligiousness (see above) were essentially *a priori*, his closer observations led him to articulate this other trope of deficient religion. Rural black churches were “mystic shrine[s],” Woodson charged in *The Rural Negro*, where “the preacher makes his emotional appeal and the seekers within the courts respond with manifestations of the spirit resembling paroxysms which could hardly be expected outside of an insane asylum.”<sup>34</sup> A generation earlier, black Congregationalist minister and AMA missionary Orishatukeh Faduma asserted from his home base of Troy, North Carolina that rural revivals brought out the “latent paganism in the Negro. The weird songs, the wild excitement of the people followed by the unchaste exposures and hysteria of women, the physical agony and

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<sup>31</sup> Edmund Brunner, *Church Life in the Rural South* 74

<sup>32</sup> Ira Caldwell, *The Bunglers* 25

<sup>33</sup> Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1937):39-40

<sup>34</sup> Carter Woodson, *Rural Negro* 160

wallowing on the floor, and the violent physical gymnastics among both sexes is a species of voodooism...It is deplorable.”<sup>35</sup>

Many of the statements above come from professional people—professors, ministers, sociologists—but the thoughts they articulate percolated the culture and informed everyday social relations. Most people did not write their thoughts down, and if they did it was certainly not as systematically as a John E. White. Nor, for that matter, was ridicule of the poor and propertyless simply or even primarily personal animosity. Rather, it was a cultural projection that framed the lives of the poor in terms generated from the propertied, and thus rendered their experience in a manner that buttressed and perpetuated the existing order. Cultural denigration of the poor worked to sustain the hierarchical order of the New South. Maintenance of this culture certainly did not require constant articulation of the full ideology behind it. It could work in innumerable little ways that drew on the dominant ideas, and vignettes of everyday life capture such workings.

Ernestine Anderson, daughter of black tenant farmers in the cotton lands of the Brazos river valley in Texas, recalled the fear and intimidation that a white landowner used to keep her father working on his land. Her father, a leading member of the Methodist church in the rural community of Riesel, had accumulated some cash and was trying to buy a small farm on some poor soil. The landowner warned, “you’ll never make it.” “Better that you don’t go,” he said, “because once you pack your clothes and leave here, I will not take you back. And if you get into trouble, don’t come asking me for money.” Anderson’s father struggled against such fear, and when he finally came to the decision to leave the plantation and strike out on his own, it was, she recalled over fifty years later, “devastating, devastating.” But he did acquire a 22 acre farm in

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<sup>35</sup> Orishatukeh Faduma, “The Defects of the Negro Church” (1904 lecture) *The American Negro Academy Occasional Papers 10* (New York: Arno, 1969):6-7

sandy soil, and later the landowner came in need of labor. The landowner was amazed at the clean appearance of the Andersons' house, apologized for what he had said, and asked Mr. Anderson for some farm work. Ernestine recalled her father's angry and courageous self-defense: "I won't repeat what he told him, but he said in a nice way...that it would be a cold day before he set his foot on his land...he said, 'because when I could have been in need, you let me know not to even come near you, not to whatever, and my family could have starved.'"<sup>36</sup>

Mr. Anderson overcame the fear that sought to keep him dependent, but sharecropper Jim Jeffcoat, who worked in the Carolinas and Georgia, struggled severely with the ridicule he first experienced as a boy. His wife, a Baptist spoke to her husband of God's forgiveness, defended his hard work—"during the busy season nobody in this family says anything about an eight-hour day," she said pointedly—even as she worried badly about his alcoholism and tried to get him to break his habit. She thought the clue to his alcoholism lay in his past. "Jim says that when he wuz a little shaver a rich man's son got mad at him and said, 'You ain't nothing but pore whites.' He asked Grandma Jeffcoat what that meant. When she told him, he made up his mind right then and there to leave Oconee County the first chance he got and if they still called him that he would leave the state. Nobody ever called him 'pore white' any more. But Jim still believes that people are thinkin' it. When they cuss him or 'pore Jim' him, he gits sore and keeps rememberin' and rememberin' that his folks were down near the bottom before the War...I believe that's one reason Jim drinks so much. The only time he forgets that he came from pore folks is when he gits drunk."<sup>37</sup>

The fear that Mr. Anderson struggled to break free from and the ridicule that plagued Jim Jeffcoat were basic facts of life for the Cash family as they struggled with the insecurities and

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<sup>36</sup> Ernestine Anderson interview 2/17/99, Baylor University Institute for Oral History

<sup>37</sup> Tom Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch, *Such as Us: Southern Voices of the Thirties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978):61-62 [original life history from 1939].

minimal options of rural poverty. But in the winter of 1935, just as J.R. turned three, a new opportunity opened up that offered the possibility of breaking free from the familiar instability and uncertainty of landlessness. Ray and Carrie Cash and their four children were accepted for membership in a newly beginning rural community, a Federal Emergency Relief Administration resettlement colony in northeast Arkansas' Mississippi County straddling the Tyronza River. There, FERA had purchased a huge tract of flat Delta land with extremely rich soil that had accumulated over centuries as the Mississippi river had periodically flooded the low-lying land. The goal of the 15,144 acre resettlement colony—the largest of these New Deal projects in the entire nation—was to bring potentially rich land into cotton production while at the same time offering small landownership and thus a new start to landless poor families throughout the state. With the federal government serving as creditor, families like the Cashes were told that with the money they would begin to make on the cotton crop, they could purchase the small farmsteads they cleared (20 to 40 acres) at the original cost the government had paid when buying the land. There would be low interest—3% or so, a level unheard-of in the cash scarce, extortionate economy of the rural South.<sup>38</sup>

The two hundred mile move by government truck from the low rolling hills of Cleveland County to the flat Delta land of Mississippi County was both tense and exciting for the family. They were leaving behind kin networks, Carrie's parents in the Crossroads community and Dave Cash in the southern part of the county, both vital supports against the worst ravages of poverty. Carrie alternately cried and sang gospel songs during the two-day journey, especially in the night as the family huddled together in the back of the truck with their worldly possessions as a cold rain beat down. As they traveled on the smaller farms of Cleveland County gave way to large

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<sup>38</sup> Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1975); Cash, *Man in Black* 7-8; Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too* 36-40

plantations and even higher rates of tenancy (95%) in Mississippi County, as well as a much denser population (875 people per square mile compared to Cleveland's 211).<sup>39</sup> Most of the plantations were owned by absentee landlords who lived in towns in the area, especially the southern county seat of Osceola. An exception was R.E. Lee Wilson, who lived on and oversaw his 28,054 acres just to the east of the FERA community with an iron hand. With skillful acquisition of cheap land, local political clout, and careful control of labor, Wilson had turned his once-swampy lands into one of the largest cotton operations in the country, worth millions of dollars.<sup>40</sup> Even with levees on the Mississippi river which formed the eastern boundary of the county, it required significant capital and labor like Wilson controlled to drain the low lands and clear the timber, thereby uncovering the rich, gummy black soil ("gumbo") and making it usable for cotton production. Work crews on federal relief had done the first part, but it was up to incoming families like the Cashes to clear the land and cultivate it.

Both the legislation enabling new communities like this and the publicity touting them were pervaded by a sense of optimism, one that initially seems incongruous with the cultural denigration of the rural poor. However, as early as John E. White's 1909 article, some social leaders believed that the poor could and should be lifted up to what White called "a safe level of civilization." One way to affirm the dominant order was to imagine the poor as "trash" beyond the scope of civilization, like Ira Caldwell in his call for sterilization or William Percy in his denunciation of poor whites. Another, like White's, was to believe that the poor, with proper guidance, could be brought into the normative workings of society. Of course, to believe in such uplift necessitated prior belief that the poor were presently "beyond the pale." Many of the people or organizations above—L.G. Wilson, Carter Woodson, the Southern Rural Life Council,

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<sup>39</sup> Statistics from [www.lib.fisher.virginia.edu](http://www.lib.fisher.virginia.edu)

<sup>40</sup> Jeannie Whayne, "Robert E. Lee Wilson and the Making of a Post-Civil War Plantation" in Randy Findley and Thomas DeBlack, eds. *The Southern Elite and Social Change* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 2002): 95-96

etc.—were actually reformers whose grim portraits of poverty were meant as goads to the action of uplift. In the FERA resettlement program such uplift was institutionalized as “Rural Rehabilitation.” With land and a stable home, the rural poor could be “rehabilitated” into society and become proper members of civilization. “Dyess Colony [as the 15,144 acre Mississippi County tract came to be called] is more than just a colony. It is a national sociological experiment in rural rehabilitation,” an Arkansas Works Progress Administration publication touted in 1936.<sup>41</sup>

Such rehabilitation was not idle rhetoric. The FERA invested some three million dollars on the initial construction of the Dyess Colony, purchasing the land, digging drainage ditches, laying a railroad spur track to the St. Louis and San Francisco line, building 500 three-to-five room farmhouses and farm outbuildings, lining new roadbeds, and constructing a community center with a store, café, hospital, cotton gin, canning factory, sawmill, and a feed mill. Also in the community center were houses and an administrative building for the colony management—professional men and women with backgrounds in large-scale farm operations, extension workers, teachers, a doctor, and the colony police—who were to guide resettled landless families like the Cashes in the skills they needed to develop if they were to become landowning farmers. Texan Lawrence Westbrook, who as director of that state’s FERA and then of the Rural Rehabilitation and Stranded Populations division of the national FERA had first originated the idea of resettlement communities, explained the principles behind them in a 1937 article in *The Nation*. “Men fail in the South not because they do not own land,” he wrote, “but because they are not competent farmers. They are incompetent because they are not physically well...They are incompetent because they are ignorant, because they do not know how to farm or how to dispose

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<sup>41</sup> *Traveling Recovery Road: The Story of Relief, Work-Relief, and Rehabilitation in Arkansas* (Little Rock: Floyd Sharp and Associates, n.d. [1936]): 157.



of farm products.” Like those in the Dyess community center, “well-trained personnel”—not ignorant and unhealthy farmers—were needed to begin to deal with the glaring rural problems of farm supervision, education, sanitation, hygiene, and diet.<sup>42</sup>

Spurring on this program for uplift was a demographic crisis accentuated by the Depression and by the New Deal’s sweeping farm legislation of 1933, the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Written and enacted by large planters and farm operators, the AAA brought cash to the pockets of the planters, took significant acreage out of production, and prompted the eviction from the land of thousands of tenants and sharecroppers. Evictions were the worst in the large plantation regions; on the huge R.E. Lee Wilson plantation just to the east, for example, hundreds of croppers were expelled from the land in 1934.<sup>43</sup> In this upheaval, huge numbers of the evicted took to the road in search of day labor, in scenes not unlike Shakespeare’s England of wandering landless beggars. Others came together for collective self-protection, forming the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in the summer of 1934, some ten miles from the FERA colony. Others, like Ray Cash in Cleveland County, illegally rode the rails in search of wage labor. Still others squatted on private land beside major roads in makeshift tent villages numbering into the thousands. Families also left the South altogether, seeking work in the newly-developing cotton lands of California’s San Joaquin and Imperial valleys. With neo-Populist proposals like the Share Our Wealth plan and a call for the abolition of the poll tax, Louisiana governor and then US Senator Huey Long gained a sizeable following and scared many Democratic politicians. These Democrats voted for the FERA and later the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act because, as

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<sup>42</sup> Lawrence Westbrook, “Farm Tenancy: A Program” *The Nation* 144:2 (January 9, 1937): 39-41.

<sup>43</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost* 64

Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo telegrammed President Roosevelt and Arkansas Senator Joseph Robinson, “with it [Bankhead-Jones] we can drive Huey Long out of the South.”<sup>44</sup>

The particular placement of the colony indicates that in addition to fears of social breakdown or Populist politics, other forces besides uplift were at work. The Arkansas administrator of FERA funds in 1934-35 was W.R. Dyess, a Mississippi County planter, lawyer, and banker, who like many large landowners lived in a town (Osceola) but whose principal wealth lay in land and its improvement. Through Dyess’ guidance of federal funds, FERA actually bought the 15,144 acres from R.E. Lee Wilson, Jr. and from Drainage District #8, a public, county-operated corporation with the task of draining swampland and rendering it viable for cotton production. Dyess thus brought additional federal cash to the county and to Wilson, his friend and political ally. He also benefited in that turning some 15,000 acres of swampy, cutover timber land in the county into extensive cotton farms increased the value of his own near-by plantations.

W.R. Dyess was killed in a plane crash in January 1936, and what had been “Colonization Project No.1” officially became “Dyess Colony.” Dyess was commemorated with a marker in the middle of the community center, and to the resettled farm families the rural community was referred to simply as “Dyess.” But the various actions and pronouncements of officials were not foremost on colonists’ minds. Rather, as was soon to become clear in struggles within Dyess Colony, the landless farmers were attracted by the promise of low credit and thus the real chance to acquire land and a modicum of economic security. It was this systemic problem in the southern economy, the prison of the crop lien system, that had ensnared them for over a generation. They were not incompetent farmers nor ignorant of how to farm; what they sought were structures of justice in which hard work actually led to reward. Yet the belief of

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<sup>44</sup> Holley, *Uncle Sam’s Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* 88

colony managers—the FERA (34-35), the Works Progress Administration (35-40), and the Farm Security Administration (40-45)—in the incompetence of the poor and their need for expert-guided uplift clashed with the strivings of the poor. Thus, though the rural community of Dyess was new and atypical in its government construction, old practices of propertied condescension toward the poor continued in the management of the colony until 1944-45, when national political battles liquidated government management. Furthermore, though Dyess spared families like the Cashes from the worst sufferings of the era, familiar patterns in the life of the rural poor—the fragility of life, the frustration of human strivings, the injustice of the social order—were not broken.

According to FERA guidelines, colonists were to work the land for a two-year probationary period before getting a deed to it and learning the specific terms of their contracts. Ray Cash and oldest son Roy spent the first years working long and hard hours clearing their twenty acres of land and turning it into a farm. Panthers and wildcats roamed the swampy woods, and the soil had never been broken by the plow. It was backbreaking labor sustained by the hope of landownership and an escape from the insecurities of tenancy. When the first deeds and contracts began to be issued in 1937-38, however, many farm families were enraged at what they saw as extortionate appraisals of the items (land, house, outbuildings, farm implements) they had bought on credit. It seemed that the old patterns, patterns of exorbitant credit and perpetual indebtedness, were repeating themselves in the new setting. A few colonists turned to the STFU for help in self-protection, and in a letter to Lawrence Westbrook, STFU secretary H.L. Mitchell reported a “great deal of dissatisfaction among the colonists” with the colony management.<sup>45</sup> Some Dyess farmers gathered at the schoolhouse to listen to Paul Finch, a tenant who lived just outside the border of the colony and who challenged the management of the colony. Finch was

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<sup>45</sup> H.L. Mitchell to Lawrence Westbrook, October 11, 1937, Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers

badly beaten by the colony sheriffs and supervisor.<sup>46</sup> At Dyess an STFU investigator found that Jake Terry, the farm manager, was “disliked quite heartily,” and that colonists viewed him as “a typical riding boss” who “continually attempts to drive them, cursing them.” When colonists sought explanation for their exorbitant accounts, they were “treated rudely” and “no information [was] given them.”<sup>47</sup>

At that time, when he was five, J.R. began to see his father’s capacity for violence. He had picked up a stray dog and in innocence named him Jake Terry. “I came home from school one day,” Cash recalled in his 1997 autobiography, “and called Jake Terry, but he didn’t come, so Jack and I set out looking for him. We asked Daddy as we passed whether he’d seen him. He said no. Eventually we found him at the far end of the cotton rows across a shallow ditch, dead, with a .22 bullet in his head. I guess I don’t have to tell you how I felt. I was five, and he was my dog.” Jack later confronted Ray, who explained that he had killed Jake Terry because he had been eating scraps that were needed to fatten the hogs.<sup>48</sup>

Due to conflicts outside the colony involving contests in Arkansas state politics, the state WPA, which had assumed direction of Dyess after the end of the FERA in 1935, transferred management of the colony to the Farm Security Administration in late 1939. When the FSA began to circulate new contracts which actually increased the indebtedness of the colonists through new appraisals, large numbers of farm families turned to the STFU for collective self-protection. In the first months of 1940 sizeable numbers of colonists joined STFU local #29, such that by late February 114 heads of household were union members and 75 had pending applications. This was a little less than two-thirds of the farm families. For a nine member advisory committee, Dyess farmers voted a straight STFU ticket—all nine were members of

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<sup>46</sup> Notarized statement, January 18, 1939, STFU Papers (regarding beating on June 3, 1938)

<sup>47</sup> Mitchell to Westbrook, October 11, 1937, STFU Papers

<sup>48</sup> Cash with Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 320-321

local #29. In an appeal to the new FSA managers, the committee wrote that “the main element which has been lacking in the operation of the Dyess project heretofore has been the failure of the management to recognize and encourage Democratic operation of the project.” The committee praised FSA policy requiring such advisory committees, and then implored, “the recent election of the Advisory Committee from the colonists is a step in the right direction. We wish to have the scope of the committee enlarged and its power extended.”<sup>49</sup> To this earnest plea for greater colonist self-direction, FSA director Will Alexander replied in a dismissive manner of a piece with liberal ideas of expert guidance: “such committees are purely advisory, and the responsibility for the management and operations of the project must rest with FSA officials.”<sup>50</sup>

At this time Ray Cash began to drink heavily, and this exacerbated his violent behavior. He would go off at night to the one beer joint in Dyess, or perhaps off the colony with friends, and return home the next morning in a drunken rage. Perhaps, like sharecropper Jim Jeffcoat, it was only in the oblivion of alcohol that Ray Cash could forget the frustrations and snares of poverty. J.R. awoke one morning to a violent scene. Carrie Cash was pleading with Ray to return to Cleveland County, where they had kin networks of support and where the insecurities of poverty might be lessened. This enraged a drunken Ray, and he was “yelling at Moma, raging and cursing. He went on and on, storming around, cutting her off when she tried to talk back to him until he said he’d had enough; he was going to beat her. He started toward her to do just that, but Jack”—J.R.’s beloved older brother, then a large-framed ten year old living up to being named for boxer Jack Dempsey—“was up by then and he stopped him...he stood up from his seat at the table and said, ‘You may hit Moma, but you’re going to have to hit me first ‘cause you’re not gonna hit Moma. You may think you’re gonna hit Moma, but you’re not, Daddy.

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<sup>49</sup> “To the Officials of the Farm Security Administration” February 22, 1940, STFU Papers

<sup>50</sup> Will Alexander to T. Roy Reid, March 4, 1940, STFU Papers

You're gonna have to hit me first.' Daddy stormed out the back door and into the fields. He never laid a hand on Jack, or me either." Fifty-seven years later, Cash wrote, "I still remember that as the greatest nightmare of my young life, hearing my mother and dad fight."<sup>51</sup>

FSA contract negotiations, initially inspiring a wave of anger and the rise of the STFU local, were very slow to proceed. In national politics the FSA was under fire, and at Dyess the STFU local presented a democratic obstacle to liberal management. It was not until 1943-44 that many new contracts were negotiated, but even with the STFU's lobby, the terms for many colonists were heartbreaking. Passionate letters of injustice poured into the STFU office in Memphis lambasting the continued extortion in the new contracts. C.B. Eubanks, one of the early colonists (he arrived five days after the Cashes) and one of the nine elected to the advisory committee, wrote seven pages to an STFU organizer in January 1944:

The people that came to Dyess...have given 7 to 8 years of their lives working hard and trying to make something for their families. No man likes relief or to work on W.P.A....We were told that the good people who was willing to work and wanted to be good citizens of our government were to be given a chance at Dyess and Dyess was made to give us that chance. We was given to understand that the government furnished the money to buy the land and to take care of the people till they could clear the land and get it in cultivation on a non-profitting plan....It promised us the land at cost (2.50 per acre on record) the seed food and clothes and all supplies was promised at cost.

Then in a style that mimicked the repetitive cadence of rural sermons, Eubanks wrote [this is the form of his letter, not my poeticization]:

After we left our homes and friends in our home co.  
And  
Knowing that we were broke and could not help ourselves  
And  
Knowing that we would be forced to buy from them  
And  
Threatening that if we left they would see that we would get no more relief or W.P.A.  
work in our home co.  
And

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<sup>51</sup> Cash with Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 319-320

Knowing that we was a group of strangers to each other and that we could not resist them at all they could ask a man to come in and you had to deal one at a time and their way.

Eubanks concluded with an appeal based on the military service of the poor and the ideals articulated during the second World War:

We realize our country is at war, our sons and brothers and friends are over sea fighting for a freedom we don't have at home they have given their lives from the first battle till today if things are not made better here at home the ones who die will be better off than the ones that come home to deal with the **F.S.A.**<sup>52</sup>

FSA managers appraised Eubanks' debt at \$3800. Cleared land on his plot was appraised at \$50 an acre, a fair market price, but not at all taking into account the Eubanks family's labor in clearing, nor the original promise that it could be purchased at 1934 cost. His barn was appraised at \$200, despite the fact that it had been built by relief crews on the federal dole.<sup>53</sup> When Eubanks refused to sign the new contract, the FSA sued him for illegal tenure. In a local judge's ruling, the FSA won, and Eubanks was forced to sign the contract to avoid eviction. "Among the residents," an STFU investigator wrote, "there was a great feeling that Mr. Eubanks had been robbed."<sup>54</sup> In official records Eubanks and colonists like him were recorded as "problem families," and a historian sympathetic to the New Deal resettlement managers concludes that such people "made a career out of dissension."<sup>55</sup> On a webpage maintained by people who grew up at Dyess as children of farm families, one descendant remembers Eubanks and other STFU members as "honorable men...honest hardworking men [who] had to take a stand to protect their farms and support themselves and their families. There should be no embarrassment."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> C.B. Eubanks to Bill Johnson, January 24, 1944, STFU Papers. For similar letters, see Ben Hendrix to Bill Johnson 1/26/44, W.J. Holland to Bill Johnson 1/26/44, E.C. Webb to Bill Johnson 1/27/44; all in STFU Papers

<sup>53</sup> David Burgess to H.L. Mitchell, May 21, 1945, STFU Papers

<sup>54</sup> "Situation at Dyess Colony," anonymous field report, January 1945, STFU Papers

<sup>55</sup> James Hicks to Select Committee of Congress, December 6, 1943, United States House of Representatives, *FSA Hearings*, quoted in Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers* 233; Holley 232 for interpretation.

<sup>56</sup> William Woody, comments posted March 3, 2006 on myfamily.com (Dyess Colony page)

As the second round of FSA contracts were being enforced in 43-44, the family sought to sell anything dispensable and to find cash-paying temporary jobs to supplement their income. Carrie Cash was a gifted singer and player of both the guitar and fiddle, and on her guitar she would play songs drawn from oral tradition, church performance, and the radio. She taught young J.R. his first songs, the gospel staples “I Am Bound for the Promised Land” and “What Would You Give in Exchange for Your Soul?” With Carrie’s singing and playing, music was ever present at the Cash homestead. “We sang in the house, on the porch, everywhere,” Cash recalled. “We sang in the fields. Daddy would be by himself, plowing, and we kids would be with Moma, chopping cotton and singing.”<sup>57</sup> Carrie strongly encouraged her son J.R.’s developing musical talent, despite Ray’s dismissive injunction that music was no way to make a secure living. Then, one day in 1944, Carrie’s beloved guitar was absent from the house. No one said a word about it, then or even later, but everyone knew that as a “dispensable” luxury, the guitar had been sold to provide much-needed cash.<sup>58</sup>

It was for the same reasons that on a late spring day that year, 12 year old Jack went to the school workshop to cut fence posts for \$3 a day. Child labor was of course the rule in the rural South, not just little “chores” that children did to build character, but rather a critical element in the agricultural economy in which the family was the basic unit of production. Both nationwide and in the urban South, reformers waged extensive and fairly successful campaigns to make child labor illegal and thus sanction a conception of the family as a unit of affection and moral education, not labor. This was not at all the case in the rural South, and at an early age boys and girls labored in the fields. Usually by the age of twelve, they were doing a full adult’s

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<sup>57</sup> Cash with Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 71

<sup>58</sup> Johnny Cash, liner notes to *American Recordings*, American Recordings, 1994



day's work in the fields: J.R. could pick up to 300 pounds of cotton on a long fall day.<sup>59</sup> The above image—of a family singing as they labored all day in the field—is an emblematic one of hard toil leavened by song, not bucolic quaintness.

Still, the regular pattern throughout the rural South was not unremitting toil. Depending on the season, Saturday could be a day of field labor, or a day for recreation or going into town to do business and socialize, or both: labor in the day and recreation at night.<sup>60</sup> Saturday night “suppers” and parties were critical sites in the development of musical forms later codified as “blues” and “country.” June Carter Cash recalled her mother Maybelle developing the guitar playing style later known as the “Carter scratch” at all-night Saturday dance parties.<sup>61</sup> Richard Wright described a typical Saturday night in the life of rural blacks in the thirties. In first person he wrote, “[we] go of a Saturday night to the crossroad dancehall and slow drag, ball the jack, and Charleston to an old guitar and piano. Dressed in starched jeans, an old silk shirt, a big straw hat, we swing the girls over the plank floor, clapping our hands, stomping our feet, and singing: Shake it to the east/ shake it to the west/ shake it to the one/ you love the best...”<sup>62</sup>

On May 12, 1944, a Saturday, the Cash family had already planted their cotton and the work requirements eased up a little even though, as Cash recalled, “it was hard times” and “the family financial situation was bad.”<sup>63</sup> J.R. wanted to go fishing in one of the drainage ditches that were carved throughout Dyess, but Jack insisted on going to the school workshop. Somewhat. In Cash's memory Jack expressed a strange feeling about it:

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<sup>59</sup> Cash with Carr, *Cash* 25. This was a standard amount for particularly hard-working children. See Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* 4

<sup>60</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Rainbow Sign: A Southern Documentary* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1959):109, Lorene Wittner interview 6/19/90; Lonnie Graves interview 10/29/91, 6/30/93; Cedell and Rosena Evans interview 8/26/93; Samuel Tucker interview 8/20/93; Vera Malone interview 12/5/75 (all Baylor Institute for Oral History)

<sup>61</sup> June Carter Cash, *Among My Klediments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979):64

<sup>62</sup> Richard Wright, *12 Million Blacks Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Viking, 1941): 73-75

<sup>63</sup> Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* 20

“I don’t know. I just don’t feel like I should go to work today.”  
“Well, why don’t you go fishing with me then?”  
“Because I need to make that three dollars.”  
Mama interrupted. “Why don’t you feel like you should go, son?”  
He said, “Well, I feel like something is going to happen, and I don’t know what it is.”  
And she said, “Then please don’t go.”  
“Mama, I’ve got to go,” he said. “We need the money I can make.”<sup>64</sup>

J.R. and Jack walked down the gravel road together, Cash recalled, with Jack acting uncharacteristically comical. After a mile they parted ways, J.R. turning off to the drainage ditch and Jack continuing on to the school shop. He fished that morning but didn’t get any bites, and himself feeling strange, quit early and began walking home. Then, coming ominously down the road from town was the preacher’s car with Ray in the passenger seat. As they pulled up beside J.R., Ray told him to throw away his fishing pole and get in. They continued along in silence.

Finally my daddy managed to say, “Jack’s been hurt awfully bad.” The preacher never said a word. And I didn’t ask another question. I knew it was terrible. I’d never seen daddy like that. We stopped at the house, got out of the car, and daddy took a brown paper sack—it was soaked in blood—out of the back seat and said, “Come out to the smokehouse, J.R. I want to show you.” We went out back. I still hadn’t said a word, and he didn’t say anything else. He took Jack’s pants and shirt and laid them on the floor of the smokehouse. I remember the smell of hickory smoke out there that day. We smoked and sometimes sugar-cured the hams, bacon, and pork shoulders from the hogs we’d kill in the winter...Dad laid my brother’s khaki pants out on the floor with his belt and khaki shirt and a pair of brown shoes. The pants and shirt were cut from the bottom of the rib cage down to the pelvis, and the belt was sliced in two. “He was cutting fence posts, and one got tangled up in the swinging saw and pulled him into it—jerked him in. He fell across the big table saw.” It was the first and the only time I’ve ever seen my daddy cry. “We’re gonna lose him, J.R.,” he said.<sup>65</sup>

Eight days later, after a brief post-surgery rally, Jack Cash died in the Dyess hospital. After a wake and large funeral at the Baptist church, he was buried in the nearest high ground, in Bassett ten miles to the east. The day after the funeral, a Monday, the entire family was back in the cotton field. Cash painfully recalled:

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<sup>64</sup> Cash, *Man in Black* 21

<sup>65</sup> Cash, *Man in Black* 22-23

I watched as my mother fell to her knees and let her head drop onto her chest. My poor daddy came up to her and took her arm, but she brushed him away. "I'll get up when *God* pushes me up!" she said, so angrily, so desperately...Many, many times that summer of 1944, Reba [younger sister] and I would see tears running down mother's cheeks while she tried to keep hoeing the cotton. We'd hear her pray, "Why, Lord? Why? Why? Why?"<sup>66</sup>

Then, turning to the 1990s reader with little if any direct knowledge of the old rural South, he pointedly wrote:

Lest you get too romantic an impression of the good, natural, hardworking, character-building country life back then, back there, remember that picture of Carrie Cash down in the mud between the cotton rows on any mother's worst possible day. When they talk about how cotton was king in the rural South, they're right in more ways than one.<sup>67</sup>

In the wake of Jack's death, Ray stopped drinking, joined the Baptist church, and in 1945 was elected a deacon.<sup>68</sup>

After Jack's death, in a cruel irony, the family financial situation actually got better. Sources do not permit a full understanding of what happened at Dyess regarding colonist-FSA negotiations, but whether through mass colonist pressure against initial appraisals, through the STFU's appeal to liberal Congressman Brooks Hays on the potential bad publicity of the Eubanks trial, through the American Farm Bureau's national attack on the liberal FSA and resulting congressional mandate to liquidate the resettlement loans, or a mixture of all three, a repayment plan was negotiated that Dyess farmers deemed fair.<sup>69</sup> Title to the farmhand (minus the community center) was transferred to a colonist cooperative, Dyess Farms, Inc. The Cashes were to pay \$2183.60 at 3% interest over a period of twenty years.<sup>70</sup> The demise of liberal management by the FSA, as well as a lingering Populist idea of cooperatives in the minds of

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<sup>66</sup> Cash with Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 36-37; Cash, *Man in Black* 28

<sup>67</sup> Cash with Carr 37

<sup>68</sup> Cash with Carr 321

<sup>69</sup> Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers* 235 (mass colonist resistance to initial appraisals) and 244-247 (Farm Bureau attack on the FSA) and H.L. Mitchell to Brooks Hays, unfinished draft of letter 1945, STFU Papers

<sup>70</sup> Christopher Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too* 51

some FSA officials, resulted in the establishment of new, collectively owned, farmer-run associations to manage the gin, store, and hospital.<sup>71</sup> It was an approximation of the “Democratic operation” that the 1940 farmer advisory committee had argued for. Cash later told his first biographer, Christopher Wren, that “I grew up under socialism,” or, as he rephrased it in his 1997 memoir, “communalism.”<sup>72</sup> With small farmers owning between 20 and 40 acres pooling together their cotton crop for the best possible prices, having used their collective power to negotiate fair terms of credit, Dyess and the other resettlement communities became in the 1940s perhaps the closest approximation to Populist ideals of the 1890s, and a living demonstration that what they needed was not expert-guided uplift regarding how to farm, but equitable credit arrangements that let labor bear fruit.<sup>73</sup>

Small landownership and cooperative marketing of the cotton crop did give the Cashes a stability that so many of the landless lacked in the thirties and forties. But the painful insecurities of those without land were evident to a young J.R. Cash. The Cash farm was on the northern edge of the Dyess Colony, and, Cash recalled to Christopher Wren in 1970, “across the road on the Stuckey plantation—it was owned by the Stuckey brothers in Lepanto—was a three-room shotgun shack. Every year, a different family would move in and ask us if they could farm part of the crops. They were in dire poverty. They’d come with rags on their backs and maybe a skillet tied on their wagon. Mostly they just walked in.” Closer to home, inside the Dyess Colony, a number of families lived secretly as squatters alongside the numerous drainage ditches carved throughout the land. One of these squatter children, a partially crippled boy named Pete Barnhill, gave J.R. his first guitar lessons and was commemorated by Cash in his *American Recordings* liner notes. Cash also remembered how other children would make fun of Pete for

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<sup>71</sup> Holley, *Uncle Sam’s Farmers* 227

<sup>72</sup> Wren, *Winners* 44 and Cash with Carr, *Cash* 19.

<sup>73</sup> Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment* 316

his limp, but more darkly, he recalled the plight of another squatter family: “about half a mile down the road, people living on the drainage ditch had a baby. The baby died. The man told my mother, ‘We just buried him over in the ditch.’”<sup>74</sup>

In a later reflection solicited by the *Journal of Country Music*, Cash wrote of an old man who “walked all the way from Southeast Texas every year about harvest time:”

He walked to our house—you could see him coming down the road....Nobody knew how old he was—he smelled like a barnyard. We’d welcome him in and feed him. My mother would cook and offer him a bath. He’d sit in the living room and tell stories. His name was Jim George. The second time he came, my father said, “Here comes old man Jim George.” He had this old blue bandanna around his neck and even when he took a bath he wouldn’t take it off. My dad finally asked him after everybody’d loosened up a little, “Why don’t you take that bandanna off and get some fresh air?” And Jim George said, “I don’t want you to see the rope burns,” and my daddy said, “What do you mean?” and he said, “I was hanged with some of the James Gang in 1882.” And we didn’t know whether to believe him or not. We didn’t have any reason not to...These were the kinds of stories I heard coming up when I was a child.<sup>75</sup>

Dyess spared the resettled farmers from the worst ravages of poverty, those experienced by sharecroppers and day laborers—even as families like the Cashes reached out in compassion to the utterly poor.

But even small farmers’ collective power, however, was not enough to endure. Though on some of the richest cotton land in the nation (still in heavy cultivation in 2006), Dyess small farmers could not compete with a “neoplantation” order marked by heavy capitalization, small labor needs, extensive mechanization, and increasingly large landholdings. Beginning in 1933 with the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and then through their powerful lobby in the American Farm Bureau Federation, large landowners used federal capital to subsidize the construction of this new order.<sup>76</sup> In demographic terms this new order meant the massive depopulation of the

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<sup>74</sup> Wren, *Winners* 70-71

<sup>75</sup> Holly George-Warren, “Growing Up Country” *Journal of Country Music* 19:1 (1997):16

<sup>76</sup> For an extensive account, see Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* chapter 2, “The South on the Federal Road”

rural South, beginning in the thirties and cresting in the fifties, when three million people left the region altogether.<sup>77</sup> More personally and closer to home, it meant a different kind of heartbreak: even as the Cashes reached the end of their payments on the farm they had worked so hard to obtain, it no longer could compete with the neoplantations. In 1948 Ray Cash rented out the farm and went to work in a Proctor & Gamble oleomargarine factory in the nearby community of Evadale. His son J.R., eighteen that year, tried wage labor in the strawberry fields of western Arkansas, automobile factory work in Detroit, work beside his father at Evadale, and then signed up for four years in the Air Force, which a year later took him to distant Germany.

Back in 1937 W.L. Blackstone had penned an early epitaph for the small farm as it competed with the newly-emergent neoplantation. The lone tenant on the President's Committee on Farm Tenancy, a Methodist preacher and a very articulate man, Blackstone summoned remarkable courage in the face of his social superiors and wrote a lonely dissent that proved remarkably prescient. "In the cotton South the small homestead visioned in many of the present proposals," Blackstone wrote, "is an economic anachronism, foredoomed to failure."<sup>78</sup> As he explained, small farmers and the landless tenancy could not compete fairly with the large landowners not because of their incompetence, not because of their shiftlessness, not because a neutral progress mandated capitalization and centralization as the way of history, but rather because the large landowners did not want them to. Edward O'Neal, Alabama planter, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, and the other dissenter from the report, invoked the principle of free enterprise in opposition to tenant resettlement—even as the neoplantation order and demise of the rural South was wrought through large landowner lobbying for infusion of

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<sup>77</sup> Kirby 69

<sup>78</sup> W.L. Blackstone, Minority Report, *Farm Tenancy: Report of the President's Committee* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1937):22

federal capital into the South.<sup>79</sup> That revolutionary process took several decades to unfold. As late as 1964, Dyess farmer Frank Huff, good friend to Ray Cash and father to one of J.R.'s best friends, J.E., made 25 bales of cotton and 1200 bushels of wheat. But as he explained in 1970, small family-operated farms of 20 and 40 acres could not compete with hundred-acre mechanized operations. Of that last crop at Dyess, he said, "do you know I lacked three hundred dollars of getting out of debt? If a man can't make a living with a crop like that, I said, that's it."<sup>80</sup>

The Dyess Colony thus captures in an accelerated microcosm many of the transformations of southern rural life in the twentieth century. Its town center, extensive drainage ditches, outlying farms, and dense population per square mile were a late (constructed 1934) version of the land improvement and town-building patterns that Gavin Wright describes as hallmarks of a new post-Civil War economy. Its depopulation as early as 1950 in the face of formidable competition from the neoplantations was contemporaneous with the mass depopulation of other rural subregions, particularly the Delta regions of Mississippi and Louisiana, and the Black Belt lands of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, but earlier than that in other subregions. While the Colony was literally new, and atypical in its equitable credit arrangements and its farmer cooperatives, old patterns in rural life throughout the South were very much at work also: the condescension of farm managers, struggles for fair terms of credit, little cushion against the sufferings of poverty, and hard work that did not automatically bring reward.

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<sup>79</sup> Edward O'Neal letter to L.C. Gray, February 12, 1937 in *Farm Tenancy* 22-23; Goodwyn, *Populist Moment* 269, 316; Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State 1877-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999):417-418; Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South*. For the continuing presence of this structure, see the four-part series by Dan Chapman, Ken Foskett, and Megan Clarke, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* October 1-8, 2006. Their articles demonstrate that the change-inducing subsidy programs of the 1930s and 40s are now used to protect and defend investments in capital-intensive agriculture in the face of globally competitive, low-cost production in places like Mali and Madagascar.

<sup>80</sup> Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too* 56

There was another old pattern that colonists brought with them and, except for the STFU local, the only institution generated solely from the grassroots: their churches. Though innumerable rural communities throughout the region were centered around churches (like the Crossroads community where J.R. was born), FERA plans and construction included no church building. The initial FERA application asked of relief workers to whom potential colonists spoke: “What is the religious affiliation of the family? Is the feeling extreme or emotional?”<sup>81</sup> While this both assumed and recognized the power of religion in the lives of rural people, it also expressed concerns about the nature of that religion, the sense that it needed to be carefully guarded. One way to do this was to avoid structures which encouraged it; while colonists were given careful lessons in the canning factory, attentive health care in the hospital, or Westerns at the theatre, no space was constructed for religious life. Even then there were problems from the managers’ viewpoint. “The mother in another family which has been returned to the home county,” a colony official wrote, “was a religious fanatic and kept the colony more or less stirred up by her outbursts.”<sup>82</sup> Another rehabilitation supervisor noted hopefully in 1935, “at present they do not have any church, and so far as I know they will not build a church as such for there is no other subject about which people will disagree so quickly.”<sup>83</sup>

Through colonist pressure the community building in the town center was opened up for church services, and farm families began regular meetings on Sundays. The leading regional denominations—the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians—sent a few home missionaries on a

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<sup>81</sup> FERA application, Box 182, Record Group 96, Farm Security Administration and Predecessor Agencies Project Records 1935-1940, Arkansas AK-80, Acc 59A-1213, National Archives

<sup>82</sup> anonymous report, Box 181

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Rural Rehabilitation Supervisor, 1935, Box 182. For similar statements regarding the hoped-for displacing of the rural church’s role in rural communities, see reports from FSA project managers in the all-black tenant community of Gee’s Bend, Alabama. FSA worker W.A. Cammack wrote hopefully in 1938 that “the entire project is fast beginning to regard this [new community] center as the place of community and social activities for the project,” as opposed to the two Baptist churches. Gee’s Bend folder, Archive of Folk Culture, Library of Congress.



sporadic basis, and one left a report which enumerated religious life in the Colony as of November 1935. The farm families had come from all parts of the state (though more from the eastern part), and in the communities they left many had been members of a specific church congregation. They told the home missionary of their old membership, and he recorded that there were 91 Baptists, 67 Methodists, 11 Church of Christ, 11 Holiness or Pentecostals, 2 Presbyterians, and 2 Catholics.<sup>84</sup> In this composition (49% Baptist, 36% Methodist, 6% Church of Christ, 6% Holiness or Pentecostal, 1% Presbyterian, 1% Catholic) they were fairly typical not just of Arkansas but of the rural South as a whole (see chapter 1). Meeting regularly in the community center for a decade or so (whether all together or denominationally separate is not clear), by the mid-40s, with their cooperative control of the cotton crop, farmers had purchased plots in the community center and constructed four churches, a Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, and Assembly of God.<sup>85</sup> The construction of these churches by resettled tenants and sharecroppers indicates that *a priori* assumptions of the irreligiousness of the landless, such as those voiced above, are faulty.

To scholars trained in the denominational model, the construction of four different churches is obvious evidence that rural people cared about denominational identity. Certainly they remained attached to the specific denomination of the congregations to which they had belonged; they did not merge into one nondenominational church, as one Rehabilitation supervisor hoped.<sup>86</sup> However, they did do something that was a regular and established pattern throughout the rural South, and a constant puzzle to denominational reformers and social

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<sup>84</sup> Junken Report, winter 1935-36, Box 181

<sup>85</sup> Author interview with A.J. Henson, January 9, 2006

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Rural Rehabilitation Supervisor, 1935, Box 182

scientists: they regularly attended churches of different denominations.<sup>87</sup> Cash's own memoirs recall attending the Baptist and Assembly of God churches with his Methodist mother Carrie, and his good friend J.E. Huff recalls that they attended any of the churches whenever they held services.<sup>88</sup>

The vast majority of rural churches met only once or twice a month.<sup>89</sup> In part, this was explained by the sermon-centered character of the low-church Protestantism that dominated the rural South. Not just anyone could bring the sermon. It took a person marked by a distinct "calling," which the congregation recognized as uniquely fitting that person for the task of delivering a divine message. In striking contrast to urban ministers in the region, most preachers for rural churches served several and traveled on a regular basis.<sup>90</sup> There were many more rural churches than preachers for them, and so preachers serving several churches and local churches meeting only once or twice a month were different aspects of the same phenomenon. On Sundays when one congregation's regular preacher was not at hand, rural people would go to another congregation, sometimes of the same denomination, sometimes not. Many a rural

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<sup>87</sup> Paul Terry and Verner Sims, *They Live on the Land* 152, 163; June Carter Cash, *Among My Klediments* 22. A thorough sample from one very specific area, the cotton lands of the Brazos River Valley in McClellan County, Texas, demonstrates the practice among whites and blacks. See Rowena Keatts interview 2/17/87; Eunice Johnson interview 7/31/86; Margaret Smith and Garnet Vardeman interview 6/14/00; Gracie Johnson Rowe interview 7/7/98; Lorene Wittner interview 6/19/90; Dora Mae Miller 6/28/90; Barbara Williams interview 4/21/98; Ernestine Anderson interview 3/30/99; Cedell and Rowena Evans interview 8/26/93; Roosevelt Fields interview 5/14/99; Edna Long interview 2/6/01; Geneva Russell interview 10/7/92 (all Baylor Institute for Oral History).

<sup>88</sup> Author interview with J.E. Huff, January 10, 2006

<sup>89</sup> Terry and Sims, *They Live on the Land* 151, Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 87, Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* 233. These case studies—of rural churches in counties in Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, and Texas, support the region-wide statistics appearing in the US Census of Religious Bodies and the Southern Baptist Convention's massive 1922 study of rural churches.

<sup>90</sup> Southern Rural Life Council, *The Church and Rural Community Living in the South* 23; Paul Terry and Verner Sims, *They Live on the Land* 150; Jeff Ray, *The Country Preacher* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1925):50; Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 96, 106; Spencer King, *Georgia—A Mission Field* (1928) quoted in Arthur Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1936): 359; J.W. Jent, *The Challenge of the Country Church* 76; Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* 242

community, with one Baptist and one Methodist church, saw local people rotating from one to the other on alternating Sundays.

That rural people would circulate from local church to local church was puzzling to denominational leaders. Duke Divinity School professor Jesse Ormond complained in 1930 of an “excessive number of country churches,” of their “needless multiplication.”<sup>91</sup> If there were three Baptist churches in a two square mile area, why not consolidate them and have services every Sunday of the month with a regular preacher? Couldn’t the effort in moving back and forth between churches of different denominations be better spent in the building up of the church of one denomination? Such queries met with few responses, and oral histories and memoirs indicate that it was because rural people enjoyed the experience of different churches. Roosevelt Fields, who grew up in black Baptist and Presbyterian churches in the Brazos bottomlands of Texas in the 1950s, recalled: “growing up at my home church, we only had services like twice a month...people would leave here on the Sundays they didn’t have service here, they would maybe go down to Pilgrim Rest. Either that or go down to Holder’s Chapel, but it was always the same peoples at the church...It wasn’t—they wasn’t so caught up in denominational anything.”<sup>92</sup> Harry Valentine, a preacher in eastern Kentucky serving white Holiness and Pentecostal churches in the 40s, said in reflection, “I never did go for denominations too much. I always try to go according to the word, and that is it...I do not dispute with other denominations too much because there are some in every denomination who are doing the very best they can. I think when He comes, He will find some of His people in every denomination.”<sup>93</sup> Across the mountains, June Carter Cash recalled of life in Poor Valley, Virginia in the 30s and 40s that “Mount Vernon

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<sup>91</sup> Jesse Ormond, *The Country Church in North Carolina* 339

<sup>92</sup> Roosevelt Fields interview 5/14/99, Baylor Institute for Oral History

<sup>93</sup> Julia Ardery, ed. *Welcome the Traveler Home: Jim Garland’s Story of the Kentucky Mountains* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1983):81

Church should have been a Methodist church according to the book, but it was the only church in our valley so we all enjoyed being Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Pentecostal. All the ministers preached there, sometimes on the same Sunday.”<sup>94</sup> Certainly rural people noted some differences—Cash recalled the use of the guitar and the more rhythmic tone of sermons in the Assembly of God church, in contrast to the piano and narrative style in the Baptist church. But the lines between many a rural church were also often blurred. There is evidence that some rural Methodists followed the Baptist practice of baptism by immersion, for example, and the ecstatic shouting usually associated with Pentecostal churches was often practiced in rural Baptist ones, by Cash’s own mother, for one.<sup>95</sup>

At any rate, it is fair to say that rural people practiced what might be called an ecumenism on foot. This ecumenism was almost entirely limited to the low-church Protestant groups (Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, Holiness/Pentecostal, Presbyterian), but it does render strict denominational categories unhelpful in analyzing and interpreting rural religious life. Cash joined the Baptist church when he was twelve, but to describe his early life as simply Baptist misses this widespread rural dynamic. From his point of view and that of innumerable other people in the rural South, several denominations were part of his institutional religious life.

As reformers and sociologists looked at religious life in the rural South, however, they saw once or twice-a-month churches not as a sign that people’s religious interest outweighed the supply of rural preachers, not as evidence of a grassroots low-church ecumenism, but rather as disturbing markers of decaying and dying rural churches. On a numerical ranking system that he developed to judge the “efficiency” of white churches, Baptist professor J.W. Jent in 1924 found the “small, fourth-time church, worshipping in a one-room building and served by an untrained,

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<sup>94</sup> June Carter Cash, *Among My Klediments* 22

<sup>95</sup> Barbara Williams interview 4/21/98, Ernestine Anderson interview 3/30/99, Edna Long interview 2/6/01 all in Baylor Institute for Oral History; author interview with J.E. Huff, January 10, 2006

non-resident pastor” to be “at the bottom and classed as ‘poor.’ There is not only something the matter with it, but much the matter with it.”<sup>96</sup> In their 1933 study Morehouse president Benjamin Mays and Atlanta minister Joseph Nicholson assessed the black rural church situation as “not hopeful,” arguing that “it can hardly be expected that the rural church will, with the present set-up, be able to command a trained ministry and develop an efficient program.”<sup>97</sup> White Baptist leader Jeff Ray found in 1925 a depressing situation of “hundreds and even thousands of country churches and communities withering into inert desuetude and even noxious decay,” and Tuskegee chaplain Harry Richardson wrote similarly in 1947 that rural churches were a “neglected, backyard fragment of the Christian church,” a sad spectacle demonstrating “the weakness, the tragedy, of a great institution deserted by its leading minds.”<sup>98</sup> But UNC professor E.C. Branson found in 1930 that “there is very little alarm about the status of the country church in the South on the part of our country dwellers.”<sup>99</sup>

Such apparently “decadent” churches were especially noticeable in areas of high tenancy, and to outside observers they confirmed the cultural assumptions noted earlier in the chapter: that the rural poor, and especially the landless, were fairly irreligious or only tangentially touched by institutions of religion. Membership statistics gathered by both the US Census of Religious Bodies and by denominational bureaucracies only solidified and confirmed this impression. In Cleveland and Mississippi counties, where as noted tenancy rates were high, only ¼ (Mississippi) or 1/3 (Cleveland) of the population were recorded as belonging to churches in the 1920s. Even an astute observer like Howard Kester, working with the STFU in eastern Arkansas counties including Mississippi County, wrote in 1936: “Although the South is frequently referred

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<sup>96</sup> J.W. Jent, *The Challenge of the Country Church* 103

<sup>97</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* 265

<sup>98</sup> Jeff Ray, *The Country Preacher* 22; Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* xiv

<sup>99</sup> E.C. Branson, introduction to Jesse Ormond, *The Country Church in North Carolina* xiv

to as ‘The Bible Belt,’ it is a land where the great masses of cotton workers are unchurched. In many areas churches have disappeared. Sharecroppers cannot afford to pay a minister and they are not welcome at the planters’ church.”<sup>100</sup> Historians who have touched on the religious life of rural people have echoed this judgment with unanimity, C. Vann Woodward writing in *Origins of the New South* of “depleted rural churches” wasting “duplicated effort,” Edward Ayers corroborating him in *The Promise of the New South* with the arguments that “because it was more rural, then, the South was less churched than the nation as a whole” and that “it was hard to keep the churches going.”<sup>101</sup>

Statistics that assume religious life was limited to the institution of which one was a member understate the institutional religious activity of rural people. But, a few careful observers found, even membership statistics for rural people could be quite faulty. Harry Richardson, who studied rural black churches in four representative counties in 1943-44, noted that according to the US Census of Religious Bodies there were 640 African Methodist Episcopal churches in Texas in 1926, but only 21 ten years later. He found that this was not because of actual decline, but rather because the census relied on questionnaires, which many churches of the poor either never received or did not return to the census bureau.<sup>102</sup> Louisa Romans DuPuy’s 1934 study of the churches of McLennan County, Texas, the majority of which was in the Blackland Prairie region with high rates of tenancy (72%), found churches densely scattered throughout the countryside, despite official census records of rather low rates of rural church membership (42%).<sup>103</sup> Likewise, James Agee and Walker Evans found institutionalized

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<sup>100</sup> Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* 47

<sup>101</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1951):451; Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South* 162 and 500n11. See also Wayne Flynt, “Religion for the Blues”

<sup>102</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 60

<sup>103</sup> Lois Myers and Rebecca Sharpless, *Rock Beneath the Sand: Country Churches in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M, 2003):x; United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Religious Bodies: 1936 Volume I* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1941):826, 698-699

religion of a very local and apparently nondenominational kind. One room of the Tenge family's shack—actually an independent structure adjoining the shack—was large and well-lit, but a large hole in the fireplace rendered it unusable for living. On the chimney a handwritten sign indicated the religious services that had once been held there: "Pleas! Be quite/ every body is welcome." Now, the room was used for storage of crops. Religious meetings had been moved to a separate "prayer meeting house," a spartan structure captured by Evans.<sup>104</sup>

The new church buildings of Dyess did not show the outward decrepitude of Tenge's buildings. The Baptist church, called "Central Church," was finished in 1945 and was unusual compared to most rural churches: though like most in being without any decoration, it was a painted two-story wooden building with the bottom level for Sunday school meetings and the top level for preaching services. The vast majority of rural churches throughout the region, like the Crossroads Methodist church in the community where J.R. was born, were one-room wooden frame structures without ornamentation other than an occasional steeple.<sup>105</sup> Harry Richardson argued that such "poorly, cheaply, and even roughly built" structures could never function as "permanent, inspiring community shrine[s]."<sup>106</sup> Sociologist Arthur Raper, studying tenants in Greene County, Georgia in the 30s, judged "the buildings and equipment of rural white churches" to be "very inadequate when contrasted with town and city churches," and was harsher in his evaluation of rural black churches. They were "mute evidence that no money was spent for a designer, that they were built by the local people at spare times, and that poor lumber often went into their construction. Of all the oddly shaped and oddly placed steeples and spires in

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<sup>104</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* 197

<sup>105</sup> Paul Terry and Verner Sims, *They Live on the Land* 150; Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 43; *Southern Baptist Handbook* 1923, J.W. Jent, *The Challenge of the Country Church* 152, Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* 259

<sup>106</sup> Richardson, *Dark Glory* 37

Christendom, the oddest to be seen are on the rural Negro churches of the Black Belt.”<sup>107</sup> Jesse Ormond likewise judged the typical white rural church he studied to be “a crude bit of architecture which offers little or no physical atmosphere conducive to worship,” and argued that “one of the greatest needs” of rural churches was “the service of a competent architect.”<sup>108</sup>

These simple buildings, and even the two-story Central Church, were a rather sharp contrast to the imposing, multi-room brick churches found both in larger cities and small towns throughout the region. Many of the more imposing of these urban churches were fairly new, as merchants and landlords turned high crop prices during World War I into durable church buildings on Main Streets across the South, prompting the *Literary Digest* to describe an “epidemic of church-building in the South.”<sup>109</sup> Sociologist C. Luther Fry confirmed this epidemic statistically: in the period 1906-1926 the urban South and Southwest led the nation in increase of the value of church edifices.<sup>110</sup> Appraisals of urban and rural church structures showed that wide disparities of wealth were manifest in the churches. In fact, the urban and rural churches of the South showed the widest disparity nationwide in appraised value.<sup>111</sup> (Obviously this is only for rural churches who responded to census questionnaires. Those who did not would perhaps have brought the valuations down.)

If the Central Church building was slightly atypical, its preachers and those of the other Dyess churches were quite typical of rural churches in that they had no college or seminary training.<sup>112</sup> Fry found “rural conditions startling” in the 1920s, and especially so in the South.

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<sup>107</sup> Arthur Raper, *Preface to Peasantry* 351, 361

<sup>108</sup> Jesse Ormond, *The Country Church in North Carolina* 343-344

<sup>109</sup> “Epidemic of Church-Building in the South” *Literary Digest* 73 (June 24, 1922)

<sup>110</sup> C. Luther Fry, *The US Looks at its Churches* (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1930):77

<sup>111</sup> Fry 79

<sup>112</sup> Author interviews with A.J. Henson, January 9, 2006 and J.E. Huff, January 10, 2006. For the larger pattern, see Jesse Moorland, “The Demand and Supply of Increased Inefficiency in the Negro Ministry” (1909) in Ernest Kaiser, ed. *The American Negro Academy Occasional Papers 1-22* (New York: Arno, 1969):6-8; Ira Caldwell, *The Bunglers* 25; Carter Woodson, *The Rural Negro* 64; Bruce Crawford, “The Coal Miner” in W.T. Couch, ed. *Culture*



“There are eleven southern commonwealths in which more than three out of five country Protestant pastors...do not claim to be graduates of any institutions of higher learning.” Arkansas had the lowest percentage; there, 8% of rural white preachers were college and seminary graduates.<sup>113</sup> In the four counties he studied, Harry Richardson found that only 10% of the rural black preachers had any seminary training.<sup>114</sup> Such “untrained” preachers were, in the judgment of Baptist leader Jeff Ray, “pitiably incompetent.”<sup>115</sup> Likewise, of the typical rural black preacher, Carter Woodson wrote, “their formal preparation is practically blank. They do well to be able to read and write intelligibly.”<sup>116</sup> This bare literacy had fatal consequences for sermons, Harry Richardson argued. “Since reading for these men is a difficult undertaking...they try in the latter half of the message to make up for the poor first part by offering a heated hodge-podge of emotional shibboleths.”<sup>117</sup>

Such lack of formal education was another basic disparity between rural and urban churches in the region. In the Southern Baptist Convention, for example, 70% of urban ministers had college or seminary training, whereas 70% of rural ministers had neither. Disparities were less in the black National Baptist Convention—63% of urban ministers had no seminary or college training, compared to 84% of rural—but still noteworthy. By contrast, the Roman Catholic church—the numerically dominant religious group in Northeast and West—showed little disparity between its urban and rural clergy: 94% of urban priests and 93% of rural priests were graduates of college or seminary.<sup>118</sup> In addition to ridiculing the “untrained” preacher,

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*in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1934):367; Faduma, “Defects of the Negro Church”; W.H. Holloway, “A Black Belt County” in W.E.B. Du Bois, ed. *The Negro Church* 61; J.W. Jent, *The Challenge of the Country Church* 155

<sup>113</sup> C. Luther Fry, *The US Looks at its Churches* 68

<sup>114</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 123

<sup>115</sup> Jeff Ray, *The Country Preacher* 59

<sup>116</sup> Carter Woodson, *The Rural Negro* 157

<sup>117</sup> Richardson, *Dark Glory* 91

<sup>118</sup> C. Luther Fry, *The US Looks at its Churches* 153, 62ff

denominational reformers concerned with uplift lamented the fact that fresh seminary graduates sought and found almost exclusively urban pastorates. “The better trained half of the clergy has been drawn to the cities or to the ‘upper class’ churches in the larger towns and better communities,” the Southern Rural Life Council noted in their 1947 report. “This has left the average rural church to young men just beginning to use their wings, to those whose wings are worn out with overuse, or to misfits.”<sup>119</sup> Seminary graduates who sought out rural churches with goals of uplift could expect to become marginalized by association, Jeff Ray noted with concern. “The man who becomes a country preacher from choice deliberately dooms himself to the lowest level in the matter of salary, the back bench in religious conventions, and the humblest seat, if he gets any at all, in denominational councils.”<sup>120</sup>

Certainly the cultural position of an urban pastorate was central to its appeal, but an additional incentive was the typical salary it paid: the Southern Baptist Convention reported that its urban ministers were paid an average of \$1342, and Mays and Nicholson calculated that urban black churches in the South paid an annual average of \$1268.33.<sup>121</sup> Rural churches paid significantly less. The 1922 Southern Baptist Convention study found that the dominant type (73% of the total number) of rural preacher, the ¼ time, was paid an average of \$144.81 a year. In 1930 Mays and Nicholson found that rural black preachers were paid an average of \$266.09, a figure that did not change materially over the next decade and a half. In their field 1934-35 fieldwork, Terry and Sims found salaries ranging from \$350 to \$50, and Richardson’s 1943-1944 fieldwork showed \$375.19 to be an average.<sup>122</sup> When depression conditions were particularly acute in the mid-thirties, “part of the salary, in some [cases] more than one-half, was paid in

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<sup>119</sup> Southern Rural Life Council, *The Church and Rural Community Living* 23

<sup>120</sup> Jeff Ray, *The Country Preacher* 18

<sup>121</sup> *Southern Baptist Convention Handbook 1923*; Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* 263

<sup>122</sup> *Southern Baptist Convention Handbook 1923* 68ff; Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* 263; Paul Terry and Verner Sims, *They Live on the Land* 150; Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 77

eggs, chickens, meat, corn, syrup, potatoes, and quilts”—all home-produced goods that sought to compensate for scarcities in a cash-poor economy.<sup>123</sup> With these minimal salaries, preachers serving rural churches either engaged in ordinary work like other rural people—farming, mining, or perhaps teaching—or tried to subsist as full-time ministers serving enough rural churches (3-4) to make for a viable living.<sup>124</sup> Jeff Ray repeated an urban judgment that had become axiomatic regarding such bivocational ministers, one that showed little allowance for structures of rural poverty: “he does enough farming to spoil his preaching and enough preaching to spoil his farming.”<sup>125</sup>

These fairly tangible statistics indicate that despite the Dyess Colony’s newness and atypicality in some respects, Cash as a child was well-exposed to patterns of institutional religion in the *rural* South. In the frequency of their meeting times, in the total dominance of religious groups of the low-church or dissenting tradition (Baptist, Methodist, Church of Christ, Holiness/Pentecostal), in the nature of the church building, in the preacher’s training and salary, rural churches were different from urban churches in the region. Every denominational reformer or social scientist who studied religious life in the region, from Baptist leader Victor Masters in 1917 to seminary professor Ralph Felton in 1950, used the categories of “urban” and “rural” to organize their analysis, and the structural elements noted here are some of the reality behind such categorizations; they were not simply *a priori* cultural projections. Furthermore, the established rural practice of regularly attending churches of different denominations was a distinctly *rural* custom, a puzzle and concern to denominational reformers, an explanation for why rural people had little to do with the machinery of denominational life—publications and pronouncements,

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<sup>123</sup> Terry and Sims 150

<sup>124</sup> The evidence from Dyess is mixed. A.J. Henson and Calvin Dallas recall full-time preachers with small salaries, Everett Henson and J.E. Huff recall farmer-preachers whose minimal salary was a supplement to their farm income. Author interviews January 9-10, 2006.

<sup>125</sup> Jeff Ray, *The Country Preacher* 14

regular meetings, roles in the bureaucratic hierarchy (see discussion of the 1922 Southern Baptist Convention survey in chapter 2).

“Rural” and “urban” have more to do with just geography, though; they were markers of class divisions in the social order of the New South. While there are not exact correspondences—some wealthy people lived in rural areas, and there were poor people in urban areas—“rural” and “urban” were rough shorthand for “working class” and “middle class.” Edward Ayers notes that new words were coined in the late nineteenth century, “hayseed” and “old-time.” “Rural life no longer won the respect it had,” Ayers argues, and behind this cultural condescension was the fact that “the average man who worked on a farm still earned less than half that of the average man who worked at some other calling.”<sup>126</sup> A generation later, the Census’ “rural-farm” population was still earning considerably less than the “urban” population, perpetuating the cultural valuations that Morton Rubin and Liston Pope found in their fieldwork (see chapter 1).<sup>127</sup>

Rural churches reflected the relative poverty of rural people, while urban churches marked the relative wealth of urban people. Evidence indicates minimal church activity across class lines; the social hierarchies manifest in the first part of this chapter reappeared in institutional religious life. H.L. Mitchell remembered of the pre-World War era that “few sharecroppers ever came to the town churches at any time.”<sup>128</sup> In Dallas County, Alabama in the World War II years when industrial jobs opened up, many rural people had moved to town (Selma) for work, but regularly traveled twelve miles on Sunday to attend their rural church.<sup>129</sup> Likewise, the plantation owners of Wilcox County, Alabama regularly traveled to town

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<sup>126</sup> Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South* 213. His chapters “In Town” and “Out in the Country” demonstrate the pertinence of attention to place in the New South.

<sup>127</sup> See, for example, the statistics for Arkansas in *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population, Volume III: The Labor Force, Part 2: Alabama-Indiana* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1943):167

<sup>128</sup> H.L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land* (Montclair: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979):20

<sup>129</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 37

(Camden) for church and invested their cotton profits in it.<sup>130</sup> In the coal camps of eastern Kentucky, small mine operators usually lived in the camp, though in a better house, with servants, a cook, and a housekeeper. They built churches for the miners, but “would never attend services there,” traveling instead to a church in a nearby town.<sup>131</sup> The Southern Rural Life Council concluded in 1947: “economic and social stratification are reflected along denominational lines as well as within churches of the same denomination.” They also lamented the class antagonisms that such a situation might foster. “Without a representation of a cross-section of the people of the community either as members or participants in its program, the church is severely handicapped in acting as a mediator or integrator in community affairs.”<sup>132</sup>

What such churches meant to rural people is suggested by practices already mentioned in Cash’s own family: Carrie’s regular attendance with her children, Ray joining the church in the wake of Jack’s death, and J.R. joining the church at the age of twelve, a typical age at which rural children became members. It is also suggested by something as tangible as the statistics above—“Sunday clothes” and the fact that Sunday was never a day of labor. Sociologists of rural life recurrently found families with few articles of clothing.<sup>133</sup> Such scarcity was symptomatic of life in the impoverished rural South, of the small number of commodities that rural people could afford. Yet many such families carefully preserved two sets of clothes, one that they wore throughout the week for their field work, and another that they wore only on Sundays. Sociologists Paul Terry and Verner Sims wrote that in the rural community of Gorgas, Alabama in the mid-thirties, “the average man had a ‘Sunday suit,’ a pair of ‘Sunday shoes’ and a good

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<sup>130</sup> Morton Rubin, *Plantation County* 46

<sup>131</sup> Julia Ardery, ed. *Welcome the Traveler Home* 26

<sup>132</sup> Southern Rural Life Council, *The Church and Rural Community Living* 21

<sup>133</sup> For a detailed sample, see James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* 257-286

shirt. For everyday wear he had two pairs of overalls, two work shirts, a pair of work shoes, and two suits of long underwear.”<sup>134</sup>

The valuation placed on Sunday clothes is captured in scattered anecdotes. Will Campbell, raised in a family of small farmers in southwest Mississippi in the 20s and 30s, recalled waiting anxiously for new white linen pants and a linen shirt purchased from Sears Roebuck catalogue. “As the baptismal Sunday approached and the new clothes had not come on Saturday it was obvious that I would have to be baptized in clothes from the previous summer, and I exploded. ‘I hate Sears Roebuck!’” His older brother Joe “agreed that we had been done a grievous wrong but said that he would hate them for me. So on a Sunday morning in June of 1931, with the congregation gathered on the bank singing, ‘Happy day, happy day/ when Jesus washed my sins away...’ I waded into the crystal clear waters of the east fork of the Amite River, capsule of piety. Joe stood on the bank, off to the side of the rest of the group as he usually was, sulking and seething at Sears Roebuck, a propitiation for my sins.”<sup>135</sup> Sharecropper Frank Tenge could not afford even the cheap clothes that Sears offered to rural people; his Sunday clothes were a composite mixture of select pieces: “nearly new white suspenders with narrow blue stripes down the sides and brown dots down the centers, the strap at the right attached to the trousers by a rusty nail,” “a nearly new blue work shirt, worn perhaps twice before since laundering,” “a very old and carefully kept dark felt hat with a narrow band and a delicate bow,” and “a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles.”<sup>136</sup> James Agee, who lived with Tenge and carefully observed his everyday life, was not sure that Tenge really needed the glasses to see. They were “worn only on Sunday,” he noted, and he surmised that they were “mainly

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<sup>134</sup> Paul Terry and Verner Sims, *They Live on the Land* 63

<sup>135</sup> Will Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* (New York: Seabury, 1977): 37

<sup>136</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* 260

symbolic of the day and of his dignity as a reader in church.”<sup>137</sup> Geneva Russell, daughter of a white small farmer in the Brazos bottomlands of central Texas, recalled that Sunday clothes were never worn any other day of the week. “When we got home we took them off,” she remembered, “we didn’t wear them around and get them all dirty and nasty.”<sup>138</sup>

That people would wear battered clothes often in need of repair during the work week and yet also set aside a new set for a single day did not make strict economic sense, but then neither do rural people’s purchase of Victrolas or automobiles.<sup>139</sup> If buying one of the latter was a complicated cultural choice inexplicable by the standards of frugality and practicality, so were Sunday clothes a cultural practice that marked the day and its events as special. While the demands of labor were strict and unforgiving, as Cash’s anecdote above about the Monday after Jack’s death illustrates, there is no evidence suggesting that rural people labored on Sundays. “Sundays is always a glad day,” Richard Wright wrote in his “folk history” of rural blacks. “We call our children to us and comb the hair of the boys and plait the hair of the girls; then we rub their heads with hog fat to make their hair shine. We wrap the girls’ hair in white strings and put a red ribbon upon their heads...In clean clothes ironed stiff with starch made from flour, we hitch up the mule to the wagon, pile our Bibles and our baskets of food...and we are off to church.”<sup>140</sup> It was a day set aside for something different, marked by special clothes that people did not wear any other day of the week.

All of the above elements—quantifiable or at least tangible enough to be observed with a casual glance—were recurrently noted by denominational reformers, rural sociologists, folklorists, and others who studied rural religious life. Especially when seen in comparative

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<sup>137</sup> Agee and Evans, 261

<sup>138</sup> Geneva Russell interview 10/7/92, Baylor Institute for Oral History

<sup>139</sup> On Victrolas in poor rural homes, see Paul Terry and Verner Sims, *They Live on the Land* 143; Tom Terrill and Jerrold Hirsch, *Such as Us* 79; Theodore Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers* 171

<sup>140</sup> Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* 67

perspective with either the urban South or with institutional religious life outside the region, such elements were institutional manifestations of the poverty of rural southerners.<sup>141</sup> Like the frequent absence of flowers surrounding the tenant shack, lack of indoor plumbing, or well-calloused hands, they were markers of rural poverty. An illustration for Ira Caldwell's article on "the Bungler" family of poor whites succinctly portrayed the almost mirror-like resemblance between tenant shacks and rural churches. [see image] One was a social, the other a religious embodiment of rural poverty.

But, beyond appearances and the easily observable, did the cultural life of rural churches and religion as practiced in rural families speak to the basic facts of rural life, its limitation, its fragility, its injustice, its subjection to ridicule and marginalization? In the more elusive realm of sensibility or *mentalite*, did rural religion really interact with the more everyday, mundane aspects of rural life? Did what people wore special Sunday clothes for engage with, shed light on, or transform the experience of the various things they encountered when they wore overalls the rest of the week?

One live answer to this question, noted above, was simply to deny that rural people had much religion worth noting. Scattered evidence above—the fact that the resettled tenants and croppers of Dyess Colony established their own churches, that Sunday clothes and the absence of labor marked the day as distinct, that religious interest exceeded the available supply of preachers—suggests otherwise, and the subsequent four chapters will supplement these suggestions and challenge the trope of the irreligiousness of the rural poor.

Contemporaneous with that trope was another that continues to have wide currency—the idea that the religion of the rural poor was actually a hindrance in coming to terms with their

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<sup>141</sup> Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churking of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1992)



unenviable socioeconomic lot. It either offered a temporary escape (not unlike binge drinking on a Saturday night) or it institutionalized their resentment through images of retribution in the afterlife. Joseph Nicholson and Benjamin Mays concluded in their influential 1933 study *The Negro's Church* that “in the country, religion is more of an opiate and escape from life.” Rural sermons ran “along the lines of the magical and otherworldliness with scarcely a dissenting voice.”<sup>142</sup> Carter Woodson, in addition to voicing the trope of poor irreligiousness (see above), also wrote in *The Rural Negro* that “when the rural church assembles in the spirit it is more of a séance. Persons have come together to wait upon the Lord. He promised to meet them there. They have no time for the problems of this life except to extricate themselves from the difficulties which will ever beset them here until that final day.”<sup>143</sup>

Novelist Erskine Caldwell mixed images of poor immorality and degenerate, emotional religion. In the text for his 1937 collaboration with photographer Margaret Bourke-White, he wrote that poor whites “intoxicate themselves with a primitive form of religious frenzy that has its closest counterpart in alcoholic drunkenness.”<sup>144</sup> A generation later, with the benefit of hindsight, he reiterated this earlier judgment: “while hunger and poverty and despair increased from year to year, religious ecstasy became the only available narcotic to dull the pain of living.”<sup>145</sup> For the 1934 compilation *Culture in the South*, Bruce Crawford wrote of coal miners’ churches: “usually the preacher, called to the ministry because of a deep, Sinaic voice, is able to transport them from squalor to realms of beauty and rest. Many a coal digger can work a whole week, or endure a week of forced idleness, after being filled with the spirit of a church meeting. The scrip clerk may scowl and bark at the housewife, or the company policeman ask her whether

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<sup>142</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* 249

<sup>143</sup> Carter Woodson, *The Rural Negro* 160

<sup>144</sup> Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* 40

<sup>145</sup> Erskine Caldwell, *Deep South: Memory and Observation* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1980):25

she has quit trading at the A&P, but there will be a welcome for her and rejoicing when she goes to glory.”<sup>146</sup> Sociologists Paul Terry and Verner Sims described religion as simple compensation in their 1940 *They Live on the Land*: “the people of all denominations and of both races were seeking security and peace of mind on the great issues of life and death. According as they lacked these things here they hoped to find them in the Hereafter. Those who enjoyed the greater material prosperity, the larger owners, were less zealously committed: they had largely turned the church over, it appeared, to the smaller owners and tenants. The men tended to turn it over to the women.”<sup>147</sup>

Perhaps the most succinct and provocative assessment of a religion of the poor that worked at cross purposes to realistic engagement with socioeconomics came from the caustic pen of W.J. Cash, as he first worked out ideas he was later to elaborate on in his 1941 *The Mind of the South*. Twelve years earlier in an essay of the same title, published in the H.L. Mencken-edited *American Mercury*, Cash wrote in the wake of the textile mill strikes that had shaken the Carolinas for a brief moment and then quickly evaporated. The principle reason for failure, and for the scarcity of labor activism in the South more generally, lay in the “mind” of the “mill-billy,” or more properly the hillbilly “mind of the soil” that newly-industrial mill-billies continued to possess. This rural hillbilly mind was at the most basic level religious—it “begins and ends with God.”<sup>148</sup> This presented a fatal obstacle to socioeconomic awareness. “Passionately interested in the shouting of souls ‘coming through’ at a tent-revival, in the thrilling of his spine to ‘Washed in the Blood’ at the Baptist synagogue,” the mill-billy/hillbilly was badly handicapped. “In such hypothetical propositions as his need of a bathtub, in such prosaic problems as his economic status, he is interested but vaguely if at all. In brief, he is

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<sup>146</sup> Bruce Crawford, “The Coal Miner” in W.T. Couch, ed. *Culture in the South* 367

<sup>147</sup> Paul Terry and Verner Sims, *They Live on the Land* 187

<sup>148</sup> W.J. Cash, “The Mind of the South” *American Mercury* 18 (October 1929):189.

totally blind to the realities of his condition.”<sup>149</sup> Nor did Cash credit the rural Protestant with a sense of justice, even one that might appear as a resentment and longing for otherworldly judgment. Cash argued that “it becomes blasphemy for the mill-billy to complain.” Protestant Christianity was vital to the inculcation of habits of deference and the perpetuation of existing hierarchies. As he put it tersely: “the peon is always a Christian.”<sup>150</sup>

W.J. Cash, through the mediation of his intellectual mentor H.L. Mencken, absorbed elements of the provocative philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, and it is not a far cry from “the peon is always a Christian” to Nietzsche’s interpretation of Christianity as at heart a religion of the lower orders, of the outcast and the dispossessed, or to Mencken’s summary of Nietzsche: Christianity was “a democratic effort to curb the egoism of the strong—a conspiracy of the *chandala* against the free functioning of their superiors.”<sup>151</sup> Nietzsche’s more abstract philosophical investigations frame the issue in a more removed manner than the cultural polemics of a W.J. Cash, but such removal may actually lead to a greater clarity of insight. Going back to the origins of Christianity among the marginalized of the Roman Empire, Nietzsche in his 1880s writings argued that with its lowly and suffering god, its imperative of compassion, and its laudation of the rejected of society, Christianity was a religious vision developed by and for people on the bottom of the social hierarchy. Lowliness and suffering, compassion, and favoritism toward the rejected were not virtues in ancient society, nor, in Nietzsche’s argument, in any healthy society. Obviously, by the fourth century, Christianity was gaining a following among the elite of late Roman society (symbolized by Constantine) but,

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<sup>149</sup> Cash 187

<sup>150</sup> Cash 189

<sup>151</sup> H.L. Mencken, ed. , Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918):21. For Cash’s indebtedness to H.L. Mencken, see Fred Hobson, *Serpent in Eden: H.L. Mencken and the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1974). Mencken not only wrote the introduction, but also translated *The Antichrist* into English for its publication by Alfred Knopf in 1918.

Nietzsche argued, it continued to bear the imprint of its lowly origins, and in the nineteenth century secular movements of democracy and egalitarianism bore vestigial traces of Christianity.

Nietzsche's interpretation was a critique, aimed at the contemporary European elite and seeking to help them excise the remaining pathological elements of the sickness that was Christianity, but in the hands of the enigmatic black theologian and Baptist preacher Howard Thurman, the idea of Christianity as speaking most directly to the poor took on a positive and invigorating tone. Thurman, who grew up in Florida in the first two decades of the century and graduated from Morehouse as valedictorian, departed from many urban Protestants in his 1949 book *Jesus and the Disinherited* by asking how the poor and socially marginalized could find real resolution of their sufferings in the Christianity of the New Testament. Like Nietzsche, Thurman argued that Jesus was very much a member of a marginalized people, the Jews of the early Roman Empire, and that his message, while speaking to human beings anywhere and of any social status, was most pointedly directed to the disinherited and their plight. It thus had a more immediate resonance in the lives of the poor, and could take on a special urgency for them. With Jesus' central teaching that "the kingdom of heaven is within you," Thurman wrote, Christianity could become "the word and work of redemption for all the cast-down people in every generation and every age."<sup>152</sup> It spoke directly to the fear, deception, and hatred at work in the social lives of the cast-down.

Nietzsche's was a philosophical (and negative) and Thurman's a theological (and positive) argument for why Christianity as a vision of life could hold a special power for poor and marginalized people, but their more abstract reasonings compliment the more specific, concrete assessments of Flannery O'Connor and Robert Coles. Though sympathetic to the poor like Thurman, O'Connor and Coles did not simply turn the tables on the dominant negative

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<sup>152</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949): 27-28

cultural valuations echoed throughout the rural South. That is, they did not turn the marginalized and impoverished into heroes or savants. Rather, both argued (like Thurman in his more abstract way) that what distinguished the poor was simply their more immediate exposure to the raw realities of life, the fact that they had fewer safeguards and means by which to cover up their sufferings. Explaining why she wrote primarily about the poor, O'Connor argued that "the poor live with less padding between them and the raw forces of life."<sup>153</sup> Coles, introducing a field study on the country blues as perpetuated by rural blacks, wrote pointedly: "we *all* are a mixed lot and full of inconsistencies." But "some of us can cover things up better, conceal a lot—in fact, so very much—from others and, alas, from ourselves."<sup>154</sup> The poor by definition experience lack, in this case, lack of resources to conceal, and thus they are more directly touched by the pathos of human life.

These are somewhat removed arguments for why the poverty and Protestant Christianity of rural people may have fused to make for a rich and substantial sensibility. They do not rely on the typical evidence-gathering of historians, though O'Connor and Coles both had in mind the rural poor of the South, while Thurman had a more global and timeless sense of the disinherited. It will be the task of the subsequent four chapters to gather and interpret evidence that substantiates this argument, that moves beyond statistics and the easily observable and into religion as a *mentalite* that engaged with the limitation, fragility, injustice, and ridicule experienced by rural people.

Before that fuller analysis, it is apropos to look at three distinct memories that Cash presented to the public. In his recounting of these memories, elements of life that historians are wont to separate—socioeconomics and religion—are inextricably fused together such that both

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<sup>153</sup> Flannery O'Connor, "The Teaching of Literature" in Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, eds. *Mystery and Manners* 132

<sup>154</sup> Robert Coles, introduction to George Mitchell, *Blow My Blues Away* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1971): vii

together constitute the experience. They also give a very personal sense to Thurman's rich psychological insight. "The doom of the children," Thurman wrote in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, "is the greatest tragedy of the disinherited. They are robbed of much of the careless rapture and spontaneous joy of merely being alive...So many tender, joyous things in them are nipped and killed without their even knowing the true nature of their loss. The normal for them is abnormal...the child of the disinherited is likely to live a heavy life. A ceiling is placed on his dreaming by the counsel of despair coming from his elders, whom experience has taught to expect little and to hope for less. If, on the other hand, the elders understand in their own experiences and lives the tremendous insight of Jesus, it is possible for them to share their enthusiasm with their children...[this] in turn will put the child out of the immediate, clawing reaches of the tense or the sustained negations of his environment."<sup>155</sup> In his parents Ray and Carrie and his older brother Jack, Cash as a child saw dramatic examples of both the counsel of despair and the enthusiasm of Jesus.

Biographers Steve Turner and Michael Streissguth have demonstrated that Cash's own relationship with his father was tense and complicated, and the 2005 film *Walk the Line* (for which director James Mangold talked extensively to Cash) made Cash's relationship with his father central to his adult development. In *Walk the Line* Ray Cash is unilaterally mean-spirited, and Streissguth's interviews with Cash's own children suggest that Ray physically abused his family and that Cash could never bring himself to tell the full story of Ray's violence, transferring it in public to the dog Jake Terry or remembering that Jack had stopped it. Cash's childhood friends A.J. Henson and J.E. Huff were both deeply upset by *Walk the Line*'s monolithic portrait, insisting that both Ray and Carrie loved their children and that the heartless man of the film was a caricature. A composite portrait seems to be that Ray was relentlessly

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<sup>155</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* 54

hard-working, a man who struggled to be a provider and who did end his alcoholism after Jack's death—and also a man who inflicted violence and left enduring psychological scars.

In his 1975 *Man in Black*, Cash lionized his father—"I don't believe a man ever lived who worked harder and was more dedicated to providing for his family than my father, Ray Cash"—in the opening line of his narrative, and singled out a story of Ray preaching at Central Church in the spring of 1945 (as substitute for the regular pastor) as an indelible and moving memory. In interviews he spoke of Ray as a gifted storyteller, and he dedicated his 1986 novel *Man in White* to Ray, who died the previous year. But by the time of his 1997 memoir, Cash wrote with candor about his father's drunkenness and violence (see the stories recounted above), and he remembered his father's utter dismissiveness towards his musical aspirations. He again remembered Ray preaching, but this time also included Ray's introductory remarks: "You've called on me to preach today and I can't turn you down, but I don't deserve to be here. I'm an evil man. I always have been. I don't deserve to stand in this pulpit."<sup>156</sup> This painful memory led to other ruminations, and Cash wrote pointedly in conclusion, "most of my life I did my best to remember the man who delivered the sermon, the man who held me on his knee, but in more recent years I've had trouble accepting his conversion...where was the justification? Was he justified in his own mind? Was he *ever* justified in his own mind? I can never really know, but I don't think he was."<sup>157</sup>

Here the most critical thing about his father's identity was whether or not he ever truly found religious resolution, or freedom of the spirit, from both the sufferings he experienced and those he inflicted on others. Such sufferings were part and parcel of life in the rural poverty of the South, and in his father, as a child and in adult reflection, Cash saw a man who ultimately

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<sup>156</sup> Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 321

<sup>157</sup> Cash with Carr, 323

seemed overwhelmed by his sufferings. Though in the latter years of his life (late 1950s-1985) Ray found freedom from poverty through his son's wealth—a freedom that had eluded him despite his hard work as a sharecropper and small farmer—a psychology of poverty, of the doom and despair that Thurman evoked, continued. The Christian promise of justification, or forgiveness and freedom from the past, seemed elusive.

The event which prompted Ray to join the Baptist church in 1944—Jack's death—was the single most formative event of Cash's life. He began to talk publicly about it in the mid-60s in interviews, and reiterated until his death in 2003 that that event had marked him more than anything else.<sup>158</sup> It occupies a central place in both of his memoirs, and the first (*Man in Black*) concludes with a strangely unexpected revisit to Jack's grave (see discussion in chapter 1). Throughout his life Cash remained unusually close to Jack in memory, in 1967 organizing a memorial celebration of Jack's birthday at his new house in Hendersonville, in his later years dreaming regularly about Jack. In these dreams Jack aged as he naturally would have. "The last time I saw him," Cash wrote in his 1997 memoir, "about three weeks ago, his hair was gray and his beard was snowy white. He's a preacher, just as he intended to be, a good man and a figure of high repute."<sup>159</sup> In a 1995 interview Cash said that he had written the better part of a novel about the year of Jack's death, tentatively titled *The Hoxie Rock*, and the film *Walk the Line* uses recollections prompted by a table saw as a framing device to chronicle Cash's early life.

Jack's death was not only a personal event in Cash's life and the life of his family but, as I argued earlier, an event that has a place in a specific socioeconomic context. Jack was working for \$3 on a Saturday because the family was badly in need of cash income, a cash income they

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<sup>158</sup> *Music City News* 3:7 (January 1966); Christopher Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too*; Johnny Cash, *Man in Black*; Nick Tosches, "Chordless in Gaza: The Second Coming of John R. Cash" *Journal of Country Music* 17:3 (1995); Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography*

<sup>159</sup> Cash with Carr 39



did not have in May because the harvest was months away, and a need that was exacerbated by enforcement of FSA purchase contracts. I emphasized the socioeconomic aspects to contextualize it in rural poverty, but I also artificially severed basic aspects of the experience as recounted by Cash in his memoirs.

Jack had rallied for a few days after the surgery, but gangrene set in and he began to hallucinate. The family gathered around his bedside in the Dyess hospital, and Jack's mind was still on unrelenting work requirements. Cash recalled: "he mentioned the crops and the fields of cotton and that we had to get the weeds out of the cotton. 'If it keeps on raining, we won't get back in the fields, daddy. We must get the crab grass out if we're gonna raise any cotton this year, if we're gonna have anything this winter.'" And then he'd lapse back into a coma for a while, then go back into hallucinating. He'd be plowing with the mules and yelling at them. They were plowing up the cotton. He'd shout, "Open the gate! Open the gate!" Jack drifted back into a coma, and J.R. slept for a few hours in an empty room in the hospital. "At 6:00 I heard somebody praying, and it woke me up. It was my daddy on his knees at the bed across the room from me, praying and asking God for the life of his son. I knew the time had come. I could hear it in my daddy's prayer." The family all gathered in Jack's room.

He was laid back on his pillow, his face gray and ashen, and he was gasping for breath. I remember standing in line to tell him good-bye. He was still unconscious. I bent over his bed and put my cheek against his and said, 'Good-bye, Jack.' That's all I could get out. My mother and daddy were on their knees. At 6:30 A.M. he woke up. He opened his eyes and looked around and said, 'Why is everybody crying over me? Mama, don't cry over me. Did you see the river?' And she said, 'No, I didn't, son.' 'Well, I thought I was going toward the fire, but I'm headed in the other direction now, mama. I was going down a river, and there was fire on one side and heaven on the other. I was crying, "God, I'm supposed to go to heaven. Don't You remember? Don't take me to the fire.'" All of a sudden I turned, and now, mama, can you hear the angels singing?' She said, 'No, son, I can't hear it.' And he squeezed her hand and shook her arm, saying, 'But mama, you've got to hear it.' Tears started rolling off his cheeks and he said, 'Mama, listen to the angels. I'm going there, mama.' We listened with astonishment. 'What a beautiful city,'

he said. 'And the angels singing. Oh, mama, I wish you could hear the angels singing.' Those were his last words. And he died.<sup>160</sup>

The experience of Jack's death—the way he himself narrated it and the hard family circumstances that surrounded it—left an enduring impression on Cash as an adult. In *Man in Black* he wrote that “the memory of Jack's death, his vision of heaven, the effect his life had on others, and the image of Christ he projected have been more of an inspiration to me, I suppose, than anything else that has ever come to me through any man.”<sup>161</sup> In his 1997 memoir, much of which he wrote at his vacation home in Jamaica, the sense of inspiration was balanced by depression. “I look around me in Jamaica at the poverty, the harshness of life for many of the people,” he wrote, “their endless toil for little reward and even less hope in their lives, just dreams and fantasies, and that puts me in mind of what still depresses me most about Jack's death: the fact that his funeral took place on Sunday, May 21, 1944, and on the morning of Monday, May 22, our whole family—everybody, including the mother who had just buried her son—was back in the fields chopping cotton, working their ten-hour day.”<sup>162</sup>

In a succinct and very painful way, Jack's death captured the intertwining of the hard facts of poverty and a deeply-held Protestantism. Jack narrated his own death in images from the book of Revelation—images that were also the principal inspiration for Cash's 2002 song “The Man Comes Around”—and in the process articulated a vision of hope. In Thurman's terms, doom and despair, or the “negations” of the environment, were not the final realities, but rather a resurrection to new life, glimpsed in the final moment of a mystical vision. For his younger brother J.R., Jack's vision of hope was never separated from the pain of loss, from bitter and depressing elements in the life of the poor. The experience dramatized how fragile life could be,

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<sup>160</sup> Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* 25-26

<sup>161</sup> Cash, *Man in Black* 26

<sup>162</sup> Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr 36

and how deeply unjust: Jack was killed doing extra work on a day of seasonal leisure, work to gain \$3 to help a family hemmed in by poverty. His vision and the “image of Christ he projected” existed in the midst of that unjust and fragile world, not in separation from it.

It is noteworthy that in relaying his vision, Jack spoke directly only to his mother Carrie. In Cash’s own public memory and in that of his children, she was a very devout woman who took her children regularly to the churches of Dyess, who passed on a substantial body of religious song, and who instilled in J.R. a sense of the religious importance of his musical talent. Cash’s recounting of Jack’s death also focuses especially on Carrie, on her field labor just afterwards and her vocal lamentations to God (see above). While Cash praised his father’s hard work and one-time preaching duty in 1975’s *Man in Black*, and candidly meditated on his violence and religious justification in 1997’s *Cash*, his memory of his mother was consistent and laudatory, and it always mixed religion and song. Cash wrote the liner notes of the 1979 album *Silver* as a letter to Carrie, made her central to the extensive ruminations in his 1994 *American Recordings* notes, and late in life he recorded a collection of songs he had learned from her, in the simple voice and acoustic guitar form in which she originally mediated the songs. These were released shortly after Cash’s death as the album *Songs from My Mother’s Hymn Book*.

The gospel songs that she sang and played on her guitar permeated everyday life, and Cash’s memories of the initial travel to Dyess, work in the cotton fields, and evenings on the front porch consistently recall song as ever-present: Carrie sang the old camp meeting staple “I Am Bound for the Promised Land” in the back of the government-sent truck that carried the family to Dyess, she led the family in singing the newer gospel composition “Life’s Evening Sun is Sinking Low” at the close of each day in the field, and she led J.R. through call-and-response into singing his first song, “What Would You Give in Exchange for Your Soul?” (a gospel

composition made popular in hillbilly music circles by the Monroe Brothers).<sup>163</sup> In his 1997 memoir Cash expressed the enduring religious power of the songs Carrie had taught him. “I’m remembering my childhood again. I’m back on the front porch of that government house in Dyess Colony, with my mom and dad and brothers and sisters, all of us together, while my mother sings her sacred songs and plays her guitar, banishing fear and loneliness, bringing the black dog [Cash’s phrase for the darkness in life] to heel, drowning out the screams of the panthers from the brush.”<sup>164</sup> As he presented it here in reflection, such music was firmly intertwined with the rhythms of everyday rural life, and it spoke directly to the less-tangible elements of life: fear, loneliness, and the “black dog.” The power of such music to speak to the darker phenomena of life stayed with Cash throughout his adult life, he wrote: “those are sounds I’ll never hear again, neither the panthers nor my mother’s comforting voice. I still have the songs, though.... Those songs have sustained me and renewed me my whole life...At times they’ve been my only way back, the only door out of the dark, bad places the black dog calls home.”<sup>165</sup>

In addition to a substantial body of religious song, Carrie imparted to her son a religious conviction regarding the musical talent he displayed at a young age. Ray was very dismissive of J.R.’s interest in music, but Carrie steadfastly encouraged it in a number of ways. Thurman’s insights about elders sharing their religious enthusiasm with their children, about taking the child’s imagination out of the “immediate, clawing reaches” of the poor environment are again pertinent. Cash crystallized Carrie’s religious sanction of his musical talent into a succinct anecdote, one that biographer Streissguth notes he told time and again and “most likely grew out

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<sup>163</sup> Cash with Carr 18-20, 70-71

<sup>164</sup> Cash with Carr 58-59

<sup>165</sup> Cash with Carr 39, 59

of proportion to the truth with each telling.”<sup>166</sup> Whatever exactly happened, the religious enthusiasm communicated to Cash at a young age left an indelible impression on him. As he told the story in his 1997 memoir, he and Ray were out chopping wood sometime in 1948-49, and he noticed that his voice dropped as he sang during the work. Later he came into the house for the midday meal, and, he wrote, “I was singing as I walked in the back door, and [my mother] wheeled around from the stove in shock and said, ‘Who was that?’ I sang some more for her, exploring my new range, and as I found out how deep I could go, her eyes teared up and she said, ‘You sound exactly like my daddy.’ Then she said, ‘God has His hand on you, son. Don’t ever forget the gift.’”<sup>167</sup>

Cash’s continued retellings of this story indicate that he tried in adult life to heed his mother’s admonition, that his musical talent was not just the force that lifted him out of rural poverty and publicized him to the world, but also was imbued with a deep sense of religious obligation. In a 1997 NPR interview Terry Gross asked Cash about his first taste of fame in the mid-50s. “Fame was pretty hard to handle, actually,” he replied. “The country boy in me tried hard to break loose and take me back to the country, but the music was stronger, the urge to go out and do the gift was a lot stronger.”<sup>168</sup> Obviously, the crisp, low voice that Carrie Cash heard that day in the Dyess farmhouse is *the* aspect of Cash that suffuses popular culture the most, more than black clothing, prison, drug abuse, June Carter—or, for that matter, the memoirs of rural youth in the Dyess Colony. Which brings up a salient question: did Cash’s principal art form, his music, show the substantive influence of his youth in Dyess, of the religion he experienced in the churches of Dyess and saw embodied in his brother Jack and mother Carrie? In this chapter I have relied entirely on Cash’s prose reflections to demonstrate that he was

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<sup>166</sup> Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash: The Biography* 35

<sup>167</sup> Cash with Carr 72

<sup>168</sup> Johnny Cash interview with Terri Gross, National Public Radio 11/4/97

deeply touched not just by his youth, but by the religion that he experienced in that youth. The sole use of prose was an attempt to establish the “real-world” experiences of Cash’s childhood. It is entirely possible, though, that Cash never really translated the pathos of his youth and its powerful religion into his own adult art. Journalist Nicholas Dawidoff, who devoted a chapter to Cash in his 1997 portrait *In the Country of Country: People and Places in American Music*, chronicled the influence that Dyess continued to have on Cash as an adult. He found Cash to be extremely intelligent, unusually reflective, and perpetually restless, but concluded with a tone of tragedy. “His greatest sadness,” Dawidoff wrote, “may turn out to be that he couldn’t do anything more with his sadness.”<sup>169</sup> The subsequently developing argument will attempt to disprove such a dim assessment.

The next four chapters move into the elaborate culture behind the prosaic statistics and readily-visible externals used here to lay out the structures of rural religious life. It is possible that behind quantifiable and tangible differences, urban and rural churches sustained basically the same culture (as forty years of historiography has argued; see chapter 2). It is also possible that, using Thurman’s argument, Protestant Christianity spoke most pertinently and powerfully to rural people, but in its actual content did not really differ from that practiced in urban churches throughout the region. In the previous chapter I argued that such homogeneity had been assumed rather than proved, and this chapter has only depicted differences of form, not content. In contextualizing phenomena like Jack’s “call” or his deathbed vision or Carrie’s gospel songs, the next four chapters will make it apparent that differences of content within the region were real. Cultural historian William Sewell argues that “people who occupy different positions in a given social order” can hold “quite different understandings of what might seem on the surface to be

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<sup>169</sup> Nicholas Dawidoff, *In the Country of Country: People and Places in American Music* (New York: Pantheon, 1997):199

identical beliefs.” Beneath a seeming Protestant homogeneity in the region—or a heterogeneity imagined along the lines of race—there were different Protestant cultures among rural and urban people, both white and black, as real as the readily recognized socioeconomic differences between tenants and landlords.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> William Sewell, “The Concept(s) of Culture” in Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds. *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999):54

## CHAPTER 4

### EVIL AND ECSTASY

Born into a landless family that struggled to survive, Harry Crews came of age in the 30s and 40s in the tobacco lands of Bacon County, Georgia. He recalled the volley of emotions that overcame him at a revival service when he was twelve. The preacher spoke of terror: “you smelled the brimstone and the sulfur and the fire and you were made to know that because of what you had done in your life, you were doomed forever. Unless, somehow, you were touched by the action of mercy and the Grace of God.” Amidst such dark admonitions, earthy things happened rather routinely. “There was no walking out at church, but the boys and girls managed. At night services, they *did* manage. I don’t know why it was so. But after the last service at night, if you could have heard the hymens popping it would have sounded like crickets in a field.” Crew went on to link religion and sex not just in actual practice, but as he sought to describe his anxious response to the preaching. “God was coming soon, was probably on His way this very night to touch you with His Love if you didn’t *come on home to Jesus right now!* You didn’t argue about it, resist it, or even think about it...But I had always known I would someday have to do God. I had been watching people do Him all my life: fainting, screaming, crying, and thrashing about over the floor. My turn had come...”

Later, Crews tried to talk to Mr. Willis, an older man who worked as a sub-tenant to Crews’ widowed mother. “The mystery of little girls stood at dead even with the mystery of God,” and Crews wanted to understand these new forces in his adolescent life. What practical moral instruction did Mr. Willis give to the confused adolescent? “God and girls is just like



farmin,” he said, “you cain’t ever git finished. Take sumpin out of the ground and it’s time to put sumpin in again. Soon’s you find out you ain’t never gone git finished, you don’t have to hurry or worry.” Crews fumbled for something to say as they rode along on the mule-drawn wagon. “It’s gone take a long time to git where we going,” he said. Mr. Willis “looked over Pete’s aged, bony withers and said: ‘Oh, it *always* takes a long time to git where you going.’”<sup>1</sup>

An emotional religion likened to the sexual experience, fervent preaching of an all-too-real Hell that threatened to claim the soul, an elusive sense of mystery instead of tangible morality—these basic elements of Crews’ narrative were precisely the patterns that concerned reformers sought to banish from the rural churches of the New South. This chapter investigates two persistent bourgeois critiques of rural Protestantism: that it was simply an emotional outlet, and that it contained little if any practical morality. I turn these around and show that bourgeois Protestants making these critiques were not seeing mirror images of themselves, of an upright morality of self-control and respectability. Instead of following this model, rural Protestants articulated a sense of ominous evil, of inexplicable darkness as a perennial aspect of human life. I present a focused comparison of the basic messages of four New South figures, showing the different tone and mood in their outlook. I conclude by arguing that the emotional ecstasy that rural people were ridiculed for makes sense within a framework that imagined God and Satan fighting in the present believer’s soul.

In the Southern Baptist periodical *Our Home Field*, minister D.H. Howerton wrote in 1921 of “large numbers of men and women in rural districts whose only knowledge of redemption is that gotten from the inadequate meetings of the rural church.” Pleading for the extension of home missions, he argued that “surely it is worthwhile to save these decadent churches...we must deliver these deluded souls from their bondage to some of the old, outworn

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Crews, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* 65

traditions and inefficient habits.”<sup>2</sup> In a series of *Our Home Field* articles a few years earlier, minister Eldridge Hatcher lamented that “the sorest spot in American Christianity...is the inefficiency of the average country church.” “A country church that conceives of no higher mission than that of having its monthly preaching services...a church with no loftier aim than that, lacks just one thing—and that is a prompt undertaker.”<sup>3</sup> In their 1903 Atlanta University study *The Negro Church*, editors Mary Church Terrell, Kelly Miller, and W.E.B. Du Bois evaluated black Protestant life through similar standards of efficiency and progress. “The Negro church is a mighty social power today,” they wrote in the conclusion, “but it needs cleansing, reviving, and inspiring, and once purged of its dross it will become as it ought to be...the most powerful agency in the moral development and social reform of 9,000,000 Americans of Negro blood.”<sup>4</sup> Some of those nine million lived in such urban places as Philadelphia and Atlanta—they were not exclusively rural and Southern. The vast majority were, however, and nowhere in the study was the critical spirit more at work than in minister W.H. Holloway’s assessment of church life in Thomas County, Georgia. In Holloway’s judgment they “presented a gloomy picture” and were far from fulfilling their “highest usefulness...as a molder of the community’s morality.”<sup>5</sup>

Sociologist Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin recalled a 1911 revival service at a rural church in the poor soil region of Richland County, South Carolina as a vital experience in her own development. She recoiled from the stark religion she witnessed there: “when the preacher came, he used terms with which I was familiar. Our Episcopal creed had them, and our theology. Hearing them at revival time somehow made them sound entirely different. Or perhaps it is truer to say that I heard them for the first time. They seemed to awaken antagonistic responses in my

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<sup>2</sup> *Our Home Field* August 1921

<sup>3</sup> *Our Home Field* May 1920, April 1918

<sup>4</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, ed. *The Negro Church* 208

<sup>5</sup> W.H. Holloway, “A Black Belt County, Georgia” in Du Bois ed., *The Negro Church* 60,62

mind, hearing them as I did against the sound of flat, hopeless voices singing: ‘Wash me whiter than the snow...’” She went on to contrast this with the “new message” of the YWCA that she heard at Brenau College. “Some might say base human nature would not change. Not the new message or the new voices. Let this religion spread, they said, and it could be potent to transform the world by changing the men who made it.”<sup>6</sup>

The YWCA’s message of social Christianity, or as Lumpkin put it, the “kingdom of heaven on earth,” was not a fringe idea alien to the spirit of Protestantism in the towns and cities of the New South. White denominational leaders did seek to create a righteous society—“a great Christian civilization” in the words of Baptist leader Victor Masters. Samuel Shepherd’s study of Richmond, *Avenues of Faith*, depicts a New South urban arena in which Protestants clearly shaped the life of the city, with city-wide revivals, laws for compulsory Bible reading in public schools, and laws against the consumption of alcohol.<sup>7</sup> Eldridge Hatcher (above) elaborated his vision of “The Country Church as a Social Center,” of how churches could instill a practical morality that would be a primary force for social betterment. Yet from early in the century and on through the forties, denominational leaders repeatedly found this spirit missing in rural Protestantism. J.W. Jent, professor at Southwestern Baptist Seminary and the SBC’s “preeminent sociologist,”<sup>8</sup> lamented in his 1924 study *The Challenge of the Country Church* that “the influence of the average country church is undeniably *minor* in the life of its community.” There was “something *radically wrong* with the program. The main thing the matter with it is that there is no program. The primitive and pioneer notion that preaching is church and church is preaching

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<sup>6</sup> Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin, *The Making of a Southerner* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1947):184-185, 188

<sup>7</sup> Masters quoted in James Thompson, “*Tried as by Fire:*” *Southern Baptists and the Religious Controversies of the 1920s* 11; Samuel Shepherd, *Avenues of Faith: Shaping the Urban Religious Culture of Richmond, Virginia 1900-1929* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2001)

<sup>8</sup> Wayne Flynt, “Religion for the Blues” 16

persists.”<sup>9</sup> The next year, fellow Southwestern professor Jeff Ray wrote in *The Country Preacher* that “too many country churches have remained static in the old pioneer, individualistic type...in many country communities if grandfather returned to earth, about the only thing he would recognize would be the old country meeting house and the church’s methods of doing business.”<sup>10</sup>

Both Jent and Ray used the Southern Baptist Convention’s massive 1922 survey of rural churches affiliated with the Convention. Howard professor Carter Woodson’s fieldwork on regional rural black churches in 1927-29 led him to voice similar conclusions. In *The Rural Negro* he wrote that “while the urban church is often trying to make this a better world in which to live, the rural church is engaged in immediate preparation for the ‘beautiful land of by and by’.”<sup>11</sup> Woodson wrote from the position of the black bourgeoisie, one that conceptualized the task of the churches not as building a Christian society in the South, but rather developing “law-abiding, respectable citizens whose diligence in work, thrift in consumption, gentle manners, good character, and patient spirit” would demand white respect and social recognition.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, in their extensive and influential 1933 study *The Negro Church*, Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson concluded that “the program of the rural church is much like that of the urban churches some decades ago. Although the problems of life in the country and city are comparable in seriousness, the reaction of the rural church to them is quite different from that of the urban church. The rural church holds closely to the traditional and orthodox soul-centered programs.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> J.W. Jent, *The Challenge of the Country Church* 107-108, 40

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Ray, *The Country Preacher* 76-77

<sup>11</sup> Carter Woodson, *The Rural Negro* 159-160

<sup>12</sup> Peter Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* 44. Paris is summarizing the message of the leaders of the National Baptist Convention and the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* 252

Sociologist Arthur Raper arrived at similar judgments in his 1927-1934 fieldwork with tenants in Greene and Macon counties, Georgia. “In the churches of both races the emphasis is placed upon personal salvation, and it gets but little further.” Because of this, he argued, “both churches are paralyzed in so far as any economic and cultural reconstruction is concerned.”<sup>14</sup> In a predominantly white tenant farming community in western Tennessee in the late 30s, sociologist Frank Alexander noted that “worship and its major feature, the sermon, seek to ‘make men right with God,’ to save their souls...With one exception, the preachers have no interest in a religion which emphasizes social ethics. Their congregations are likeminded. Religion is one’s personal relation to a Supreme Being; one’s goodness is only incidental to this relationship.” Alexander asked people in the community a host of questions, among them “will you make a statement of what religion means to you?” Many were baffled. One male tenant perhaps confused Alexander in return when he responded, “a true Christian has the love of God in his heart and all power.”<sup>15</sup> Tuskegee chaplain Harry Richardson asked similar questions in his study of rural black religious life in four representative counties. To his question “what benefits do you derive from church membership?” people answered: “It helps my soul. It feeds my soul. It keeps me straight. It helps me to be a better Christian. It lifts me up. It gives me a chance to work with my brethren. It gives me spiritual strength. I get salvation.” Richardson concluded that “practically, all of the laymen had never thought that other than spiritual benefits should be derived from church membership.” What was needed were new reform-minded pastors to teach “progressive Christian living.”<sup>16</sup>

If observers did not see rural churches that instilled a practical morality aimed at community upbuilding, they did see plenty of emotion. Indeed, they contrasted the self-

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<sup>14</sup> Arthur Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* 372

<sup>15</sup> Frank Alexander, “Religion in a Rural Community of the South” *American Sociological Review* 5 (1941):248

<sup>16</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 175 [fieldwork in Dallas County, AL; Calhoun County, SC; Mississippi County, AR; Northumberland County, VA]

forgetting displays of emotion with a practical morality embodying self-control and self-possession. Of rural churches in Black Belt counties like Thomas, W.H. Holloway argued in 1903 that “the supreme element in the old system was emotionalism, and, while we hate to confess it, truth demands that we affirm it as the predominating element today.”<sup>17</sup> In a 1904 lecture, black North Carolina minister and AMA missionary Orishatukeh Faduma asserted that “in Africa Christianity is displacing paganism, in rural America paganism in displacing Christianity. Our rural population is confronted with a form of Christianity which does not civilize.”<sup>18</sup> White Baptist home missionaries sent in similar reports from their work with mountaineers and tenants. “I know stories of immorality and ignorance that would parallel those told by foreign missionaries occurring all around us,” a missionary wrote of her work with tenants in Robeson County, North Carolina in 1911.<sup>19</sup> Surveying the “home field” described in such reports, the editor lamented that “the destitution in some respects at least is not less than among the heathen.”<sup>20</sup>

In a 1930 portrait of the “Bungler” family of poor whites for the journal *Eugenics*, Presbyterian leader Ira Caldwell found the family to be “very, very religious.” The character of this religion was quite deficient, however. They were “usually among the loudest and longest shouters,” and it was “not uncommon for them, along with others who adhere to this high-g geared form of religious expression to dance the ‘holy dance,’ which some irreverent youngster in the community called ‘Sunday hoochee coochee.’”<sup>21</sup> Carter Woodson was scarcely less sympathetic to the rural blacks he studied that same year. In describing emblematic rural church scenes he wrote: “while in a state of prayer for deliverance from sin, [the convert] falls into a trance,

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<sup>17</sup> W.H. Holloway, “A Black Belt County” in Du Bois, ed. *The Negro Church* 58

<sup>18</sup> Orishatukeh Faduma, “Defects of the Negro Church” in *American Negro Academy* 7

<sup>19</sup> Mary Livermore, “Mission Work Among Backward People” *Our Home Field* October 1911

<sup>20</sup> *Our Home Field* January 1909

<sup>21</sup> Ira Caldwell, *The Bunglers* 7

prostrate like a man in a dying condition...He gradually awakens from his stupor, usually saying with a peculiarly primitive intonation: 'Thank God! Thank God! Thank God I was born to die! He snatched me like a brand from eternal burning and saved me from hell's dark door.'"<sup>22</sup>

Photographer Margaret Bourke-White, who toured the impoverished backroads of the region with writer Erskine Caldwell (Ira's son) in the late 1930s, found lamentable similarities between black and white rural worship. "The Negro churches are not, somehow, so shocking," she told a journalist, "because you think of Negroes as being actors and emotional, but with the white people the whole business is so sordid and desperate and out of place. It isn't as though their church played any role, as we know religion. It's just a place where people go to shout and scream and roll on the floor. They are so beaten down and their lives are so drab and barren and lonely that they have nothing. This terrible thing every Sunday is their only emotional release."<sup>23</sup>

In rampant emotionalism white Baptist leader J.W. Jent found the clue to the absence of practical moral education. "The real rub," he wrote in *The Challenge of the Country Church*, "is the persisting rural idea of religion—the conscious or unconscious conception of religion as mere emotionalism, hence, having nothing to do with social phenomena or community life."<sup>24</sup> He appealed to seminary-educated, reform-minded ministers to go into rural communities and become advocates of a new ethos, one that would issue in tangible and practical change. Similarly, in *Dark Glory* Tuskegee chaplain Harry Richardson argued that the chief weakness in rural black churches was the "tendency to regard violent emotion as the highest religious expression." All aspects of the church service—singing, preaching, testifying, praying—were

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<sup>22</sup> Carter Woodson, *The Rural Negro* 160

<sup>23</sup> Bourke-White, in James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* 452

<sup>24</sup> J.W. Jent, *The Challenge of the Country Church* 109

informed by this “determination to produce such emotion at each service.” It was little surprise, then, that “unwholesome social practices...often accompany revival meetings.”<sup>25</sup>

It is worthwhile here to interrogate these critics and unravel the principal elements of their pattern of thinking, because these observers and others of like mind have been used at face value in reconstructing the religious life of the rural poor. These sources informed C. Vann Woodward’s brief glance at New South religious life in *Origins of the New South* (itself formative for later religious historians), and they continue to be used by more recent synthesizers like Edward Ayers in *The Promise of the New South*, and even by historians sympathetic to the rural poor, such as Wayne Flynt and Rebecca Sharpless and Lois Myers.<sup>26</sup> These sources are valuable and can tell us something—but only if they are read critically. Most importantly, they do tell us what outsiders did not see. To better understand what was absent, we need to spend a moment understanding the mentality by which these observers were evaluating rural religion.

In *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South 1865-1920*, Ted Ownby presented a portrait of two cultures clashing in the South in the fifty-five years after the Civil War, a traditional “male culture” valuing aggressive competition, displays of strength, and public self-assertion, and a newer female-dominated “evangelical culture” esteeming self-control, order, and harmony. Ownby argued that by the turn of the century, and certainly by the 1920s, the standards of evangelical culture had triumphed over male culture and become the official code of behavior for the region, exemplified by new laws like those prohibiting the use of alcohol. As argued earlier (chapter 1), Ownby’s working definition of “rural” is imprecise, including mill and cotton trading towns like Anderson, South Carolina and Greenville, Mississippi, and powerful urban-based spokesmen like Sam Jones and Len Broughton. The

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<sup>25</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 94, 53

<sup>26</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South*; Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*; Wayne Flynt, “Religion for the Blues”; Lois Myers and Rebecca Sharpless, “Of the Least and the Most”



principal subjects of the book are people closely associated with the rise of New South towns. But Ownby's argument for post-Civil War innovations and the turn-of-the-century ascendancy of morality of self-control is helpful. The basic dynamic at work, however, is not a gendered struggle between "female" evangelical culture and traditional "male" culture, but rather the rise of a new class in the new economy of the New South, a bourgeoisie involved in the spread of markets and seeking to differentiate themselves from the old planter class and from the rural masses of their own time.

The social order was in flux in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and evangelical leaders lived and moved in this scene as they crafted a new religious vision to navigate it. "I know healthy young men who 'dude' around our streets all the week, spin yarns, fight cocks, 'root' for base-ballers, play cards and read novels, and think nothing of going to their old fathers Saturday nights and demanding 'spending change,'" Atlanta Baptist minister Len Broughton lamented in 1890 as he surveyed the newly bustling urban scene in which a new Protestant ethos was taking shape.<sup>27</sup> In Florence, Alabama in the 1880s and 90s, W.C. Handy learned from his Methodist minister father that enterprise and thrift were cardinal virtues, that "an idle brain is the devil's workshop," and that the aestheticism of the guitar made it a "sinful thing," "one of the devil's playthings." His Fisk-educated teacher furthered such admonitions by warning that "musicians were idlers, dissipated characters, whisky drinkers and rounders"—not respectable types who would embody and manifest racial self-respect in an era of possibilities.<sup>28</sup>

This new economy of the post-war South involved the spread of markets, a fervent wave of town and city building, and the rise of a new class in the towns and cities—landlords,

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<sup>27</sup> Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South* 83

<sup>28</sup> W.C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1957):7, 10-11

merchants, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and ministers, or, a “county seat elite.”<sup>29</sup> It was this class who left the most easily accessible records for reconstructing regional religious life, and historians have examined these sources for the past forty years (chapter 2). What they have found is a Protestant ethos focused heavily on regulating individual behavior through a moral code of self-control that shunned idle “fun.”<sup>30</sup> The appeal of this ethos is best understood if we consider the central thesis of Edward Ayers’ *The Promise of the New South*: that the newly capitalist economy of the post-Reconstruction South involved the spread of markets, as goods traveled into and out of the region on miles and miles of quickly-spreading railroad track. For those most directly involved in this new arena, possibilities were both tantalizing and disturbing. *Things* were available as perhaps never before, and yet there was a danger, voiced by W.E.B. Du Bois in his meditations on the emblematic New South city of Atlanta, that “material prosperity” would come to be seen as “the touchstone of all success,” in a triumph of “the rising Mammonism of the re-born South.”<sup>31</sup> The emergent evangelical code sanctioned rather aggressive competition in business, and it did not condemn displays of wealth in home or church, as Sam Jones’ Victorian manse or the innumerable ornate New South churches in county seat towns indicate. It did, however, come to focus almost obsessively on patterns of consumption, on the frittering away of cash on behaviors that yielded no fruit.<sup>32</sup> Such behaviors came to be seen as trashy, as vulgar, as those of people did not care about developing their character or improving their lot in life

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<sup>29</sup> Earl Black and Merle Black, *Politics and Society in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987):6

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Fichter and George Maddox, “Religion in the South, Old and New” in John McKinney and Edgar Thompson, eds. *The South in Continuity and Change* (Durham: Duke University, 1965): 365 on “fun;” more generally, see Peter Paris, *Social Teaching of the Black Churches 44-77*; Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920*; Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*:163-195; Rufus Spain, *At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists 1865-1900* 174-201; Samuel Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis* 107-112; Ted Ownby, “Mass Culture, Upper-Class Culture, and the Decline of Church Discipline in the Evangelical South: The 1910 Case of the Godbold Mineral Well Hotel” *Religion and American Culture* 4:1 (Winter 1994); Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities Among Southern Baptists 1865-1925* 77-135

<sup>31</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 1989 [1903]):55,57

<sup>32</sup> Ted Ownby, “Mass Culture, Upper Class Culture, and The Decline of Church Discipline”

through control of self. As the new ethos optimistically believed in the possibility of self-control, so also it believed that the churches could and should turn outward. They should move beyond internal scrutiny (whether of self or local church) and into the larger society with the goal of its moral upbuilding and even purification.

This moralistic Protestant ethos was not unique to the South in the New South era—Moody-Sankey evangelicalism with its controlled emotion and individual moral code flourished in the nation in the post-Reconstruction years and was perpetuated and framed in Billy Sunday’s theatrical style in the 1910s and 20s.<sup>33</sup> Anthony Comstock sought to regulate the public morality of the nation’s largest city, and prohibition of alcohol was a national movement that gained official victory through the act sponsored by Andrew Volstead of Minnesota. Still, with barely a trickle of immigration in the New South era, the South remained an overwhelmingly Protestant region, and the new ethos had special force there. When H.L. Mencken satirized the region in the 1920s and 30s, his eye was not on the masses of rural poor, but on the bustling emergent New South towns and cities, home to “the most noisy and vapid sort of chamber of commerce” and “the Methodist parson turned Savonarola.”<sup>34</sup>

In an earlier essay, the 1914 “The American: His New Puritanism,” Mencken pushed through to a critical insight about the new ethos in Protestantism. Comparing the present to the older Puritan world of New England, he argued that the “new Puritanism is not ascetic but militant.” Chronicling the dramatic social transformations in the wake of the Civil War, he argued that “the religion of the American began to lose its old inward direction; it became less

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<sup>33</sup> Sandra Sizer, *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978)

<sup>34</sup> H.L. Mencken, “The Sahara of the Bozart” in William Andrews, ed. *The Literature of the American South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998):372

and less a scheme of personal salvation and more and more a scheme of pious derring-do.”<sup>35</sup>

Mencken was right to stress the innovative character of this new religious ethos. Though in popular memory this militantly moralistic religion is deeply associated with repressive tradition and old-fashioned narrowness, it was in fact a nineteenth century product with an optimistically progressive bent.

A central component of this newly optimistic and moral Protestantism, Jackson Lears has argued, was the gradual disappearance of Satan and Hell. In an older mentality, shared by Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox, “Satan” named a force of darkness in life, independent of human willpower, that fomented deceit, dissension, and disintegration. Satan tormented the individual soul, and the absolute triumph over Satan was attained in this life only by a distinct minority of saints. Hell was the real future for those souls who Satan was able to ultimately claim, and there, forsaken by God and abandoned to the darkness that had overpowered them in life, they suffered without reprieve. These ideas remained basic to the Christianity transplanted to the United States, but as Andrew Delbanco has chronicled, through the forces of Enlightenment and an emergent national optimism older ideas of darkness receded in the gradual “death of Satan.”<sup>36</sup> By the turn of the twentieth century, national periodicals carried articles noting “The Passing of the Devil” and asking “What Has Become of Hell?”<sup>37</sup> This transformation opened the door, Lears writes, for “profound emotional change.” Those who ceased to believe in the dark forces of Satan and Hell “won freedom from fear but lost

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<sup>35</sup> H.L. Mencken, “The American: His New Puritanism” in S.T. Joshi, ed. *Mencken’s America* (Athens: Ohio University, 2004): 62-63 [originally *Smart Set* 42, no 2 Feb 1914]

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995)

<sup>37</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994):331n96 [George Shinn, “What Has Become of Hell?” *North American Review* June 1900]; 332n97 [“The Passing of the Devil” *Scribner’s* April 1899]

possibilities for ecstasy” and “the intense yearning for salvation waned.”<sup>38</sup> To put it in the New South context that Ted Ownby studied, the Satan to be subdued had transmogrified from inexplicable darkness to, in a word, *fun*, and a fun that New South evangelicals believed they could subdue through rigorous self-discipline, communal church vigilance, and the force of law. Confident of the possibilities of self-control, the new Protestants looked askance at self-abandoning displays of ecstatic emotionalism. Such behavior no longer signified being overcome by divine salvation from the terror of darkness, but rather crudely primitive inability to maintain control and composure in public.

We might add an additional force to Delbanco’s: a longing for order and control in a rapidly transforming era. Robert Wiebe has argued that *The Search for Order* drove the national spirit in the decades overlapping the turn of the century as cities boomed, immigrants surged into the country, and new industrial powers wrought drastic transformations in inherited patterns of life.<sup>39</sup> While the New South was not transformed as drastically as the nation, new forces—if not immigration, massive urbanization, and large-scale industrialization—were at work in the region, and it is no coincidence that Protestant leaders forged a new ethos directed at new options in the new cities and towns. Seeking order and control amidst the possibilities presented by the newly capitalist economy, the leading Protestant voices pushed inexplicable darkness to the back of the picture, Satan became simply “bad” behaviors or places from which one could willfully refrain (drinking alcohol, dancing, gambling), and Hell, if invoked, became a spur to living the morally upstanding life. This new code was vital to the self-understanding of the region’s new bourgeoisie, and those who embodied the code were models of “respectability:” upright, self-controlled, stable pillars of the newly emerging communities.

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<sup>38</sup> Lears, *No Place of Grace* 44

<sup>39</sup> Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967)

Guided by the memoirs of Lillian Smith, who grew up in the north Florida town of Jasper in the early decades of the twentieth century, Donald Mathews argued that this new Protestant ethos helped white southerners establish and fortify the culture of segregation. “Such a religion,” Mathews writes, “encouraged the mental, moral, and emotional process of pushing ‘everything dark, dangerous, and evil’ [Smith] to ‘the rim of one’s life.’”<sup>40</sup> “Evil was thought to have been purged from the sin-distressed self so that [white] Southerners had become fascinated with other people’s evil rather than their own,” and behavior was “driven not by a confession of one’s own sin but the draconian punishment of others.”<sup>41</sup> As if to confirm Mathews’ argument that this new ethos was an exclusively white phenomenon, folklorist Bruce Grindal argued based on 1970s fieldwork in the rural black community of Midway (only a few counties west of Smith’s Jasper) that “black religion places little emphasis upon moral purity,” and that this was “in marked contrast” to the white Protestantism described by Samuel Hill and other historians. Grindal concluded that “the southern black world view is, therefore, dirt-affirming, and exists in polar contrast to the dirt-rejecting philosophy of the white Southerner.”<sup>42</sup>

Both Mathews and Grindal offer insights into the spirit of the new ethos—insights that will be helpful in unraveling the different sensibility at work in rural Protestantism—but their thesis that the new Protestant ethos did not cross the color line and in fact fortified it is simply not bourn out by the evidence or the historiography. Glancing back at the first seven pages of this chapter, we can see that both white *and* black observers from the bourgeois class rendered stringent judgments on rural people of both races, and that such judgments came from a

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<sup>40</sup> Donald Mathews, “Lynching is a Part of the Religion of Our People: Faith in the Christian South” in Beth Schweiger and Donald Mathews, eds. *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture* 164

<sup>41</sup> Donald Mathews, “The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice” *Journal of Southern Religion* 8,15

<sup>42</sup> Bruce Grindal, “The Religious Interpretation of Experience in a Rural Black Community” in Robert Hall and Carol Stack, eds. *Holding on to the Land and the Lord: Kinship, Ritual, Land Tenure, and Social Policy in the Rural South* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1982): 97-98

mentality with notions of morality and respectability. A J.W. Jent was as harsh in his judgment of rural white Baptists as was a Carter Woodson in his evaluation of rural blacks. All of these observers used the categories of “urban” and “rural” quite easily. Chapter 2 already argued that in the arena of the New South, such categories make more sense of the religious story than do long-established racial categories. This is not to deny that the culture of segregation inherently involved powerful moral conceptions that divided the races. Nor does it dispute the fact that similar notions of respectability and morality could have very different social effects based on the dynamics of power—an urban black Baptist shunning idle amusements and modeling respectability was a challenge to the hierarchical order of Jim Crow, whereas a white Baptist behaving similarly implicitly fortified it. Still, we remain closer to the evidence and get better inside the logic of regional religious life if we think that the dominant Protestant ethos at work in the culture of the New South was new, an innovation that taught a practical morality of self-control, dispensed with traditional conceptions of evil by rendering Satan into bad—or idle and fun—behaviors, and was primarily a class phenomenon, vital to the new bourgeoisie’s identity as respectable people who distanced themselves from the trashy and vulgar. And it was precisely this ethos that bourgeois observers did not see as they studied rural religious life. Turned around and read critically, their observations can therefore provide an opening point for moving inside the rural Protestant mentality, its pervasive sense of darkness, its ecstatic emotionalism, and its movement not towards social or communal uplift or purification but rather into the hidden interiority of the heart.

Rural Protestants lived in a world marked by sin and corruption. Will Campbell recalled that in the late 20s in Amite County, Mississippi, sawbriars covered the hills. They were “hostile toward everything around them. They were considered a part of the curse, a curse we grew up

believing was somehow a part of the Adam and Eve story... We hated them because one was supposed to hate evil. We revered them because the Bible taught us that it was a part of what we had coming to us on account of someone's long ago sin—sin which was passed on to us and which became our own."<sup>43</sup> In Bacon County, Georgia in the 30s, Harry Crews' black neighbor Willalee passed on his mother's explanation for why mules couldn't procreate. " 'Well...in the time of Jesus,'" Willalee began, and went to describe how "it was a mule that had carried the beams out of which Jesus' cross was made and for that reason the mule had forever after been deprived of the joy of coupling with his own kind." Willalee continued: " 'It also how come mules have to work so hard at the plow, on account of what all they done in olden times.'"<sup>44</sup>

Evil was not just bad behaviors from which the upright self-controlled subject could willfully refrain. These tangible forms demonstrated as much, but in fact the real focus dwelt on the evil within, where Satan tormented the soul and the possibility of abandonment to Hell was all too real. Bourgeois observers were struck by rural people's belief in the Devil. From the Smoky Mountains in 1914, a Baptist missionary sent in a bemused report about an old man she called "uncle Bob," a man who led the singing at church in a log school house and who shouted and danced ecstatically. He and his family lived in a one room cabin, and he stored his coffin under his bed. "Uncle Bob was no stranger to the wiles of Satan. 'I fit with him last night,' he said. 'He come to my bed and axed me to do jest one lettls thing fur him. I tole him I wouldn't, for I knowed when I done that he would make me do sumthin' bigger. He begged and begged, but I tole him to go way.' The blood rushed to his face and the fire to his eyes as he talked of this face to face conflict with the enemy of his soul."<sup>45</sup> Quaintly primitive, with childlike dialect—

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<sup>43</sup> Will Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* 11

<sup>44</sup> Harry Crews, *A Childhood* 105

<sup>45</sup> *Our Home Field* May 1914



this missionary's valuations are transparent, but beneath them we can see a disturbing inner struggle, a fight against a darkness that assails one even in seeming repose.

“Uncle Bob” was not an isolated exception. Across the region observers found similar belief. In his 1909 study of “the representative average songs that are current among the common mass of negroes,” Howard Odum concluded that “the devil is prominent in the religious songs of the Negroes. He is the constant terror and proverbial enemy of the race. He is alive, alert, and concrete...He is the enemy against whom the battle is always on.”<sup>46</sup> In the late 30s at a church in Austin County, Texas, black preacher Tanner Franklin warned his hearers that Satan was “forever meddling with the Lord’s sheep...He worries at their souls and aggravates them, ‘til it just look like there ain’t nothin’ to do but to give in to him.” Thus the life of the Christian was a “battlefield” where one was “fightin’ it out with old Satan every day.”<sup>47</sup> In the same years on the other side of the region, in the coal country of eastern Kentucky, white preacher and miner Findlay Donaldson voiced similar admonitions. “That old devil that was cast out of heaven, that old serpent that’s been after the human race ever since he was cast out upon the earth, we find him today. He’s a traveling through the world, he’s after our souls, of our children, he’s after you and me....It’s hard to live. Why? Because the power of the devil is so great, the power of Satan and sin is so great over the human race today that you’ve got to have the keeping power of God.”<sup>48</sup>

Of his father Lloyd, a white Baptist preacher and farmer in Madison County, North Carolina in the first half of the century, his son Garrett Chandler recalled: “my Daddy saw the Devil every day. You know you’re saved when the Devil’s right behind you, walking on your

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<sup>46</sup> Howard Odum, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Southern Negroes* (Worcester: Clark University, 1909):23

<sup>47</sup> John Henry Faulk, *Ten Negro Sermons* (M.A. thesis, University of Texas, 1941):10,14

<sup>48</sup> Findlay Donaldson, January 1938, AFS 1979A-1983A, Archive of Folk Culture, Library of Congress

heels. If you're not saved, he doesn't have to mess with you."<sup>49</sup> In "Conversation with Death," a song that he began to sing after his 1916 conversion, Chandler evoked the awful possibility of Death dragging an abandoned soul into Hell: "Your heart is fixed, your mind is bound/ I have that shackles to drag you down/ Too late, too late, to all farewell/ Your soul is doomed, you're summoned to hell/ As long as God in heaven shall dwell/ Your soul your soul shall scream in hell."<sup>50</sup> In the same vicinity in the same years that Chandler sang, Presbyterian home missionary R.P. Smith listened to a "brother of great repute" preach "one of his notable sermons," a sermon about the power of the Devil, and Harry Crews emphasized this prominence in recalling that in the 30s and 40s "Hell was at the center of any sermon I had ever heard in Bacon County."<sup>51</sup> Across the Blue Ridge from Smith, in southwest Virginia's Poor Valley, June Carter Cash learned of the Devil as a real presence during her youth in the 30s and 40s.<sup>52</sup> A.J. Henson recalls that sermons in the Dyess Colony gave a prominent place to "Hell and brimstone," and J.E. Huff remembers learning of God and Satan that "if one's real, the other one's real. If one's not real, the other one's not real."<sup>53</sup> From the rather unlikely venue of his network television show in 1970, Johnny Cash echoed Huff's recollection of what was learned in the Dyess churches. "All my life I have believed there are two powerful forces," Cash said directly to the camera in a statement he had prepared, "the force of God, and the force of the Devil...[the Devil] can make it pretty rough on you when he tries to take over. I know. In my time I fought him, I fought back, I clawed, I kicked him."<sup>54</sup> Later, in his liner notes to the 1996 *Unchained* album, Cash reminisced of Dyess: "The talk about sin and death and eternal hell without redemption, made a mark on me.

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<sup>49</sup> Carl Lindahl, "Thrills and Miracles: Legends of Lloyd Chandler" *Journal of Folklore Research* 41:2/3 (May-December 2004):140

<sup>50</sup> Lindahl, "Thrills and Miracles" 126

<sup>51</sup> R.P. Smith, *Experiences in Mountain Mission Work* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1931):95; Harry Crews, *A Childhood* 65

<sup>52</sup> June Carter Cash, *Among My Klediments* 26-27, 85, 87-89, 147

<sup>53</sup> Author interviews with A.J. Henson and J.E. Huff, January 9-10, 2006

<sup>54</sup> Steve Turner, *The Man Called Cash: The Life, Love, and Faith of an American Legend* 140

At four, I'd peep out the window of our farmhouse at night, and if, in the distance, I saw a grass fire or forest fire, I knew hell was almost here."<sup>55</sup>

Tuskegee student Nathaniel Colley found strong belief in the Devil in the black tenant community of Gee's Bend in Wilcox County, Alabama in the late 30s, heard a woman describe in her testimony how she was "called to go across the river of hell on a spider web," and noted that in sermons hell appeared regularly as a "city of darkness" and "burning brimstone."<sup>56</sup>

Richard Wright depicted the Devil as a staple theme of rural sermons in his 1941 "folk history" of rural blacks.<sup>57</sup> In a predominantly white rural community in western Tennessee, a male small farmer told Frank Alexander in the late 30s that the "Devil gets me when I get mad."<sup>58</sup> "Rev. Renfrew," Alan Lomax's pseudonym for the elderly black country preacher he met in Dallas in the late 1930s, said, "I don't think he's visible. He's a spirit. There's no man, I don't believe, has ever seen the Devil with his own two eyes and they never have seen God. God have been revealed to us through Jesus Christ; but the Devil have never been, because he'd have scared us all to death. The Devil gets in you, and when he possesses you, you just as bad as you can be. It's nothing but the Devil makes men do evil..."<sup>59</sup>

In the late 40s, in the quickly transforming Alabama Black Belt county of Wilcox, sociologist Morton Rubin found what he regarded as hopeful signs of a slow decline in these older beliefs. "Hell and the Devil are gradually giving way to more lofty ethical sentiments," he wrote, and rural people were coming to see that "morality is a vital issue; the teachers utilize the

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<sup>55</sup> Johnny Cash, *Unchained* liner notes. See also Cash, *Man in Black* 10

<sup>56</sup> Nathaniel Colley, "An Exploratory Study of the Customs, Attitudes, and Folkways of the People of Gee's Bend" (c1940):13 in Gee's Bend file, Archive of Folk Culture, Library of Congress

<sup>57</sup> Colley, "Exploratory Study" 13; Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* 69-72

<sup>58</sup> Frank Alexander, "Religion in a Rural Community of the South" 242

<sup>59</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Rainbow Sign* 181

schools and the churches to teach the younger generation Protestant Christian values.”<sup>60</sup>

Protestant Christian values meant the bourgeois ideals that marked the new ethos described in the preceding pages, and Rubin’s contrast of such values with older ideas of personified evil was apt. Still, the gradual nature of these changes needs to be emphasized, for older rural people speaking after mid-century continued to invoke Hell and the Devil. Their more extensive ruminations help in fleshing out the substance of belief that pervaded the rural South before the mid-century transformations.

A white Kentucky coal miner described the internal rigors in his life: “sometimes over there in that little church of ours I feel there’s forgiveness in this world, and the good Lord, he’s near us, and He isn’t going to let us get completely taken over by the bad in the world, the bad that’s in yourself and the bad that’s in others. But like the Bible will tell you, it’s a big struggle, and no matter if you’re high or low, you’re going to be fighting the struggle all your life, and a lot of the time you’ll be near to losing, with the Devil just about to claim you his property, but then you’ll be singing a hymn or like that, and you’ll turn around and realize you’re in danger and get saved in the nick of time, yes sir, right in the nick.”<sup>61</sup> A black Alabama sharecropper depicted her everyday life as a struggle with dark feelings. “I’ll wake up sometimes and I’ll ask myself whether it’s going to be today that something real bad will happen. Some days just go fast and nothing real bad happens, but all of a sudden we’ll get a lot of troubles come our way, and it makes you wonder if you can last. It’s then that you stop and remind yourself the Lord is up there, and He doesn’t miss a single trick. I mean, how could He?...I admit that every once in a while I catch myself getting worried. That’s when I’ll say to myself that maybe *this* is Hell, right

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<sup>60</sup> Morton Rubin, *Plantation County* 142, 127

<sup>61</sup> Robert Coles, *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers* 589 [fieldwork 1966]

where we are, right here. And it's not a good thought to have. It's a bad one! But sometimes you can't help yourself."<sup>62</sup>

A white Georgia sharecropper described her sexual seduction by a deceitful preacher: "You see, there's God Almighty, and there's Satan, and I swear it can be hard to know between the two, sometimes, because the Scripture tells us that the Lord was wonderful and smart and He knew how to do anything He wanted, and He could beat the doctors, and beat the priests of the temple and beat the kings and emperors, if He wanted to. But we're told that the Devil is a smart one, too; and he can pull all of the tricks you can imagine, and then some. If you ask me: it's very few on this earth who can tell the difference between Jesus Christ and the Devil. People can turn on you. That preacher turned on me, I believe."<sup>63</sup>

A white farm laborer recalled:

My oldest daughter said to me once: 'Daddy, what about the worms, and what about the drought, and what about the flies and the mosquitoes?' I told her: Mary, you mustn't divide up the Kingdom, good from bad—what you like and what you want, from what you don't like and what you don't want. God put us here to test us, and there's no escaping Him, and there's no getting away from his test. If He wanted us all to get by, without a test, and stay near Him, there wouldn't be this earth, like we know it. The snake came, and Adam and Eve couldn't stay away from that snake; it got to them...Every day there's a snake in our lives; every day, I tell you. It don't matter who you are. It don't matter where you live. Your heart cheats. Your eyes cheat. Your ears pick up all the gossip in the town, and they won't let go of it. Those flies, they're inside us—landing all over the place. Same with the mosquitoes. There's nothing so bad on the outside, that it don't have its equal on the inside. I hear your mother bad-mouthing someone, and I know there's a lot of mosquitoes, a lot of flies that have got to her. And to me: I see some people in trouble, and I'll be a fly and land on them.<sup>64</sup>

Alone in his room at the end of a work week, a sixty year old black unskilled laborer in the north Florida Midway community fought with the Devil. "His experience with the Devil is closely tied to his drinking problem" folklorist Bruce Grindal found. "Most often this experience

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<sup>62</sup> Coles, *Migrants* 594-595 [fieldwork late fifties-mid sixties]

<sup>63</sup> Robert Coles, *Flannery O'Connor's South* 97 [fieldwork early to mid sixties]

<sup>64</sup> Coles, *O'Connor's South* 60 [fieldwork early to mid sixties]

would occur on a Friday evening after work, and begin with feelings of nervous agitation, bad temper, and withdrawal. These feelings then would focus upon an obsessive compulsion for alcohol. There was nothing that could restrain him... That night in bed he would lie awake and toss in a kind of impotent rage. It was then he knew the Devil had him, and the more he struggled, the more he saw the Devil cruelly laughing at his misery. The next morning he would awaken in depression and disgust, and to relieve the pain, he would begin drinking again.” The man told Grindal: “All the Devil wants to do is kill you, and you are a fool because you let him do it.” “Finally,” Grindal summarized, “with fear and trembling, [he] would put down the bottle and take to bed; after hours of inner struggle, he would ‘cast the Devil off his back,’ whereupon he would feel a renewed vigor and sense of life.”<sup>65</sup>

A white woman in the North Carolina mountains recalled a disturbing vision. “Now you know a lot of people say there’s no hell, but I’ve seen that. I guess it was in a dream, it don’t seem like to me it was. But I seen my soul and it looked like just a black...crow or something, you know just a flying-around. And this smoke was coming up out of that pit, and there was just a lot of them birds a-flying around, and once in a while one would go down in there. And I was one in the crowd now, I just knowed I was. And it just...bothered me to death...And I woke up and I got up and went out on the porch, and it still yet seemed like to me that I could just see that, you know...”<sup>66</sup> Jesse Hatcher, a black eighty-eight year old small farmer in Patrick County, Virginia, told a symbolic story to depict the Christian’s perpetual struggle with evil that could strike unawares. “We all suffer one way or another,” he began, “one way or another, sooner or later. And then lastly, that zone in the flesh will strike us. Did you ever think of that? That zone

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<sup>65</sup> Bruce Grindal, “Religious Interpretation of Experience” in Hall and Stack, eds. *Holding On to the Land and the Lord* 96-97[fieldwork 1970s]

<sup>66</sup> Beverly Patterson, “Finding a Home in the Church” in Ruel Tyson, James Peacock, and Daniel Patterson, eds. *Diversities of Gifts: Field Studies in Southern Religion* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988):68 [fieldwork 1980-83]

will strike us. And it's a stumbling block to you if you let it." Hatcher then described his typical late summer task of pulling fodder from corn, then cutting the tops and tying them together. He was working in the cool of the evening, alone, tying the tops together, when he felt "something real cold moving" on his arm, and as he shook it a rattlesnake dropped to the ground. Hatcher ran to his neighbor's house, borrowed his shotgun, and killed the rattlesnake in the corn patch. To him it represented the snares of evil: "anyway in the world you look at a rattlesnake, he's looking at you...He always sees you first."<sup>67</sup>

There are some tangible behaviors here that one could describe as moral issues—alcoholism and adultery—but the manner in which they and the other anecdotes are framed indicates something other than free choice to refrain from bad behaviors. Evil is a real force, not simply the sum total of willful human agency, and it is an active force that assails and seeks to conquer. It particularly strikes when the supports of family, kin, neighbors, and church are not around, in the depth of sleep or alone in a field. The attacks of the Devil, though, are no sign of the person's lack of faith—in fact the exact reverse is true. What Garrett Chandler says pervades the anecdotes: "You know you're saved when the Devil's right behind you, walking on your heels. If you're not saved, he doesn't have to mess with you." The Christian has no security of distance from forces of darkness; it is precisely in the Christian's soul that the struggle against evil is waged. Hell, the possibility of the triumph of evil and abandonment by God, is a real fear, and one woman wonders, in moments of despair, if perhaps her life right now is not Hell.

Her struggle against despair is far more intangible but no less real than the bourgeois Protestant ethos that demanded willful refraining from bad behaviors. Despair, violent anger,

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<sup>67</sup> Patrick Mullen, *Listening to Old Voices: Folklore, Life Stories, and the Elderly* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1992):48-49 [fieldwork 1978] Though he did not publish their stories or anecdotes, anthropologist Charles Hudson found pervasive belief in the Devil among rural-born working-class white southerners in his 1961 fieldwork in North Carolina. See Charles Hudson, "The Structure of a Fundamentalist Christian Belief-System" in Samuel Hill et al, *Religion and the Solid South* 122-142

doubting the possibility of forgiveness, deceitful seduction, tearing others down through gossip, abandonment to the oblivion of addiction: the struggle against these is a difficult one, and if one entertains them for more than a moment, like the rattlesnake on the arm they threaten to kill. What the Midway man says—“all the Devil wants to do is kill you”—is true for all the struggles, for these forces threaten to tear apart not only the individual soul but the bonds that sustain everyday life. Like the sawbriars that tear the flesh or the barren mule, the Devil destroys *life*: the struggle is right now, in everyday existence. In the 1930s G.W. Blevins, a miner, small farmer, and preacher in Wise County, Virginia, composed a song to depict the struggle of the Christian for life:

There's a way that seems right unto man  
The end of the way is death  
Where the wicked in flames shall descend  
There'll be wailing and gnashing of teeth  
There's a straight and narrow way into life  
It leads to the city of God we are told...  
There stands the tree of life it's always blooming  
On either side at the river of life  
Its leaves is for the healing of the nations  
It'll cure all division and strife...<sup>68</sup>

We will return to this idea of a struggle for life, a struggle that begins in the soul as it fights the attacks of the Devil, in a moment. The presence of the Devil and the fear of Hell do show that rural Protestants articulated a different sensibility than the new Protestant ethos of practical morality geared to willful abstention from bad behaviors. They gave voice to a perpetual, difficult struggle against the destructive and unpredictable power of evil.

We can better place this sense of evil in context and contrast it with the new bourgeois conception through a microcosmic comparison of the messages of four preachers/poets of the New South era: the urban ministers Sam Jones and J.M. Gates, and the rural musicians William

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<sup>68</sup> G.W. Blevins, “Blevin’s Christian Song” Archive of Folk Culture AFS 2766A-2767A [recorded 1939]



Johnson and Ira Louvin of the Louvin Brothers. These figures are not perfect as sources. Jones and Louvin are rather far removed in time. Yet Jones was a pioneer in articulating a Protestant message that recurred throughout the New South era, and Louvin drew on his rural past in crafting his Satan songs, even describing remembered events in country churches in the mid-song recitations—their spirit is certainly alien to the mainstream culture of post-World War II America.<sup>69</sup> Three of the figures are accessible through the mediation of commercial recording: Gates, Johnson, and Louvin. But a coherent body of sermons from a single rural preacher simply does not exist from the New South era. There are sermons and sermon fragments, to be analyzed in chapter 7, but the benefit of looking at the recorded output of Johnson and Louvin is that we may see more than just one snapshot of a message. There are written sermon collections from urban black ministers, but Gates' huge popularity based on mini-sermons opens an interesting door into the tangible, routine messages heard in a New South city church. Furthermore, the Louvin Brothers were a major influence on a young J.R. Cash, especially during their tenure (1946-1950) on Memphis' WMPS radio station, where they performed three shows a day and from which they traveled to play shows in surrounding areas, including the Dyess Colony.<sup>70</sup> Cash would also have heard some of Johnson's songs through the mediation of his favorite singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a black Church of God in Christ evangelist who appropriated several of Johnson's songs into her own repertoire.

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<sup>69</sup> Such recitations could be simply artistic artifice, as David Sanjek notes of Merle Travis' narrations on *Folk Songs of the Hills*. See Sanjek, "All the Memories Money Can Buy: Marketing Authenticity and Manufacturing Authorship" in Eric Weisbard, ed. *This is Pop: In Search of the Elusive at Experience Music Project* 164-165. But Charlie Louvin insisted to biographer Charles Wolfe that most of the Louvins' gospel recitations were based on actual events. See Charles Wolfe, *In Close Harmony: The Story of the Louvin Brothers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1996)

<sup>70</sup> Wolfe, *Close Harmony* 33-37 and Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* 32-34. Wolfe notes that the Memphis years "saw a veritable explosion of creativity from Ira" Louvin, that it was in these years when he composed many of his gospel songs.

William Johnson was born in Washington County, Texas in 1897 to parents who went their separate ways shortly after his birth, his father from one tenant arrangement to another, his mother into domestic work before an early death. Blind from the age of seven, Johnson developed remarkable skill on the guitar, and with his guitar and sermonic messages rendered into song, he traveled extensively to perform on town squares, city streets, and radio shows. Not that this brought him any wealth: his itinerancy, like that of the rural class from which he came, was also a badge of his poverty. His one surviving child recalls but the briefest memory of him, and her mother's relationships with several other men. "We was working people, see," she explains.<sup>71</sup> Elderly people in small New South Texas towns like Hearne and Marlin, interviewed in the fifties, recalled Johnson playing for country people when they came to town on Saturdays. Johnson may have played material other than religious songs, but it is clear that he pursued the role of street evangelist, a form that includes Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Rev. Gary Davis, Pearly Brown, and others.<sup>72</sup> Minimal later records show that in 1944 Johnson was pastoring an independent church, the "House of Prayer" (also his residence) in Beaumont, and his 1945 death certificate says that he died of malarial fever and syphilis.

Recorded 1927-1930 and advertised by record companies as "Blind Willie Johnson," Johnson's thirty existing songs provide a window into his evangelism. What was Johnson's message on the Saturday streets? It was not directed toward the possibilities for consumption that faced rural people on their day in town. Rather, it spoke to something more elusive and intangible, the inwardness of the soul which, in Johnson's taunting "The Soul of a Man," the respectable types had come to forget: "well, won't somebody tell me/ answer if you can/ want

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<sup>71</sup> Michael Corcoran, "The Soul of Blind Willie Johnson: Retracing the Life of the Texas Music Icon" *Austin-American Statesman* 9/28/03

<sup>72</sup> For the street evangelists and their recorded songs, see Paul Oliver, *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984):206-228

somebody to tell me/ just what is the soul of a man...I saw a crowd stand talking/ I just came up  
in time/ was teachers, the lawyers, and doctors/ 'well, a man ain't nothing but his mind'."<sup>73</sup>

Johnson seldom directly invoked the Devil and Hell, but rather poetically evoked a sense of alienation, incompleteness, and inexplicable sorrow. "Motherless Children Have a Hard Time" (mislabelled by Columbia as "Mother's Children Have a Hard Time" and advertised as a sentimental song of "mother love"), Johnson's version of the slave spiritual "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," used the loss of one's mother as a metaphor for the terror of abandonment: "motherless children have a hard time/ when mother's dead/ have a hard time when mother's dead/ they'll not have anywhere to go/ wandering around from door to door/ have a hard time...well some people say that sister will do/ when mother is dead that sister will do when mother's dead/ some people say that sister will do/ but soon as she's married she'll turn her back on you/ nobody treat you like mother will."<sup>74</sup> In "I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole," with tense and sliding high notes on his guitar, he sang of wholeness and health with a tortured vocal: "I was sick and I couldn't get well/ I was sick and I couldn't get well/ I just touched the hem of his garment...Jesus' blood can [make you whole]/ Jesus' blood can [make you whole]/ I just touched the hem of his garment."<sup>75</sup> In "Lord, I Just Can't Keep from Crying" he sang of the sorrow that plagued the soul: "I'm on the King's highway/ I'm trusting him every day/ but I just can't keep from crying sometimes/ well I just can't keep from crying sometimes/ when my heart's full of sorrow and my eyes fill with tears/ Lord, I just can't keep from crying sometimes."<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Blind Willie Johnson, "The Soul of a Man" Columbia 14582-D (1930)

<sup>74</sup> Blind Willie Johnson, "Motherless Children Have a Hard Time" Columbia 14343-D (1927)

<sup>75</sup> Blind Willie Johnson, "I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole" Columbia 14276-D (1927)

<sup>76</sup> Blind Willie Johnson, "Lord, I Just Can't Keep from Crying" Columbia 14425-D (1928)

In the midst of these evocations of the darker side of human life, Johnson preached the urgent need for Jesus' rescue. In "Jesus is Coming Soon," he used the mass death of the World War and influenza epidemic to describe the need for salvation from destruction. In "Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed" Jesus rescued the Christian from the oblivion of death: "I'm dead and buried/ somebody said I was lost/ [but] when you get down to Jordan/ ask the ferryman how did I cross/ done gone over/ done gone over/ [Jesus] make up my [dying bed]." But death was only the final rescue; Jesus was intimately apprehensible in the travails of the present: "since me and Jesus got married/ haven't been a minute apart/ he put the receiver in my hand/ and religion in my heart/ I can ring him up easy/ ring him up easy/ [Jesus] gon' make up [dying bed]."<sup>77</sup>

One searches Johnson's output—his own compositions, adaptations of older slave songs, and appropriations from gospel songwriters—in vain for a tangible moral instruction or specific admonitions about behavior. The closest Johnson comes is when he sings "I was a gambler, just like you" in "I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole," but this is a summons to those enjoying frivolity to see that they are sick and incomplete. What Johnson conjures up is feelings or states of the soul, and the tone or mood is one of ominous urgency, meditation on the darkness in life, and joyful celebration of God's power. Johnson's is precisely the kind of elusive and "emotional" message that reformers attacked when they asserted that the rural church had no "program."

Ira Louvin ("Loudermilk" at birth, "Louvin" was the name he used as a performer) was born in 1924 into a white small farming family on northeast Alabama's Sand Mountain. He was raised in the Baptist church, and many people, including his younger brother and singing partner Charlie, believe that Ira was "called" to be a preacher but rejected the call. Like many other rural youth in the forties, Louvin found a way out of rural poverty through mill work and other jobs in

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<sup>77</sup> Blind Willie Johnson, "Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed" Columbia 14276-D (1927)

the booming postwar cities, in this case Chattanooga and Knoxville, but his real pursuit was as a singer and musician. By 1946 the brother duo of Ira and Charlie were working full time as musicians on Memphis radio shows, giving stage shows seven nights a week, and in 1955 they secured a spot on Nashville's Grand Ole Opry show. From 1952 until their disbanding eleven years later, they recorded some 200 songs for Capitol. In their first three years (1952-1955) Capitol marketed them exclusively as gospel singers, a role that the duo fought successfully to get out of. Still, the gospel material that Ira wrote before and after 1955 was more than just dutiful employment for the company, or simple heeding of audience requests. Privately, Charlie recalls, Ira was "tortured by religion," even as publicly, in the country circles of Nashville, he gained a notorious reputation for womanizing, drinking, and violent outbursts.<sup>78</sup> In his gospel songwriting Ira drew on his rural past, often working remembered events from country churches into mid-song recitations, to craft a body of songs that evoked the power of darkness. These songs told listeners that "Satan is Real," in the phrasing of one of Ira's songs used for the title of a 1958 LP. For that LP, Ira designed and built the set whose photograph is the album's cover art, and one of the most famous album covers in country music.

Unlike Johnson's songs, the Satan of Ira's is explicit. But the Devil is the same force of disintegration that tears apart the soul and human communities. In "The Family Who Prays" Ira warned in his sharp tenor: "Satan has parted/ fathers and mothers/ filling their hearts with his envy and hate/ heading their pathway/ down to destruction/ leaving their children like orphans to stray." On "Born Again," the Devil sowed doubt in the heart: "Satan tells me that I only thought I got saved/ he tells me what a fool I've been/ but when my mind goes back to that old bench where I prayed/ I know that I've been born again...many times along the way my faith has grown weak/ when burdens seem to rise on every hand." "Satan Lied to Me" depicted a deceitful

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<sup>78</sup> Nicholas Dawidoff, *In the Country of Country* 63

voice of false friendship and satisfaction. “Satan lied to me/ Satan lied to me/ when he said he’d be my friend/ all I’d ever need/ Satan lied to me/ Satan lied to me/ he told me I was satisfied/ Satan lied to me.” Satan also deceitfully said that the life of the Christian was about no longer having fun “[he] told me I would lose my friends/ that my fun in life would end.” The give-and-take of “Satan and the Saint” framed it as a contentious dialogue between the Devil and the Christian. “ ‘I have the world to offer you’/ ‘Yes you have the world to hold/ til the day when God declares/ time on earth shall be no more/ fire and brimstone shall rain down in heaven like the snow/ what will you have to offer then to a dying soul?’” The Devil also promoted an illusion of purity: ‘You don’t sin you’re good enough’/ ‘there’s not a just man upon earth/ that doeth good and sinneth not/ all we like sheep have gone astray/ we have turned, everyone, to his own way’.”<sup>79</sup>

Unlike Johnson’s songs, tangible moralisms do appear here and there; it is not only about the soul and its inner struggles, or their social import. “If We Forget God” criticizes popular fashion, and “Preach the Gospel” promotes preaching against whiskey consumption. These messages do confirm what Rubin found in Wilcox County a few years prior to the writing and recording of these songs. Still, the dominant tone in the Louvin gospel songs, the one found in all the songs that use recitations from the older rural scene, is one of evil as a perennial and powerful force that assails and attacks the faithful. Life is a struggle, and the struggle begins in the unseen soul or heart. Indeed, the spirit of the Louvins’ gospel songs is of a piece with the murder ballads and tales of estrangement and brokenness in their larger repertoire, even as Johnson’s haunted and poetic preachments share a kinship with the alienation and cosmic disorder in the early blues beyond sound and AAB stanzas.

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<sup>79</sup> All songs on The Louvin Brothers, *The Family Who Prays* (Gusto 2003 [Capitol 1958])

A rather different spirit—the new Protestant ethos—is at work in the sermons of J.M. Gates and Sam Jones. Gates was born in 1884 in Troup County, Georgia to a black tenant family but, like many other rural youth, left the countryside for the booming New South city of Atlanta. There, Gates became the long term pastor (1914-1945) at a Baptist church in the Rockdale Park neighborhood. Beginning in 1926 and continuing until 1941, Gates recorded some 200 “sermons with singing” for Columbia, dominating the genre in output and sales. Gates’ recorded mini-sermons, with deacons and laity often audible to recreate the church setting, display a New South Protestant vision notably different from Johnson’s message. “Don’t Hide from Your Furniture Man” and “Pay Your Policy Man” commend faithful payment of debts, while “Goodbye to Chain Stores” warns against the too-easy availability of consumer goods, which ensnare people by gobbling up their paycheck, and elaborates reasons why the small merchant is the consumer’s real ally.

In Gates’ sermons we can hear a practical ethic of social uprightness and respectable behavior. “Kinky Hair is No Disgrace,” Gates tells his congregation, and “Saturday Night Black Maria Riders,” “No Room in the Jailhouse,” “Meeting the Judge on a Monday Morning,” and “Did You Spend Christmas Day in Jail?” warn that the consequences of lawless behavior need await no post-mortem punishment; state mechanisms effectively punish the immoral. “Things That You Can Move Don’t Ask God to Move” articulates the ethic of willful self-control and pokes fun at belief in mysterious miracles and wonders. The inherited language of Hell and the Devil are there, but the Hell of “Hell Bound Express Train” was no longer the awe and terror of abandonment by God, but the entertainment thoroughfares of the New South cities. Gates as conductor led the listener on a pointed itinerary: “I can hear the damnation bell ringing/ I hear it coming moving through the land/ all passengers getting on board...some getting on from

Rampart Street in New Orleans/ some getting on from Beale Street in Memphis Tennessee/ some getting on board from Eighteenth Street in Birmingham Alabama...getting on board from Decatur Street Atlanta Georgia/ some midnight rambler getting on board from Church Street in Norfolk Virginia.”<sup>80</sup>

White Methodist evangelist Sam Jones was, Edward Ayers argues, “perhaps the one Southerner whose name was known to the greatest number of people inside and outside the region” in the New South era. Ayers made Jones the central figure of his chapter “Faith” in *The Promise of the New South*, and judged Jones to be “the voice of the conscience of those Protestants who lived in the towns and cities of the New South.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, while Jones is technically part of an earlier era—born shortly before the Civil War to a yeoman family in Alabama and flourishing in the contentious decades surrounding the turn of the century from his home base in the New South town of Cartersville, Georgia—he was a central figure in the crafting of an innovative Protestant message that echoed throughout the New South in the years after his death.<sup>82</sup> Unlike the messages of Gates, Louvin, or Johnson, Jones’ sermons were written and published, in many collections during his lifetime and in the wake of his death. Perhaps the most succinct entry into Jones’ basic message comes in the memorial collection that his wife published in the year of his death, 1906. She gathered together the best-known of Jones’ “sayings”—anecdotes, admonitions, aphorisms that he wove into innumerable sermons—for a concluding portrait and tribute to the evangelist.

Jones’ audience was urban, in both region and nation, and he assumed the bustling arena of towns and cities as his backdrop. “The roar of commerce, the click of the telegraph, and the

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<sup>80</sup> J.M. Gates, “Death’s Black Train is Coming” Columbia 14145-D (1926)

<sup>81</sup> Edward Ayers, *Promise of the New South* 173,177

<sup>82</sup> Kathleen Minnix, *Laughter in the Amen Corner: The Life of Evangelist Sam Jones* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1993)



whistle of the engine have well-nigh drowned out the voice of God,” Jones lamented, and in the emerging capitalist scene it was disturbingly obvious that “the tune of America is pitched to the dollar.”<sup>83</sup> The religious alternative was stark: “life’s in a community. Here is a theater on this street. Here is a prayer-meeting across the way. There they go, and you can not tell whose dogs they are to save your life. But when they get to the intersection of the streets, and they turn toward the theater or toward the prayer-meeting you know who are the devil’s dogs, and who belong to the Lord.”<sup>84</sup> Jones was unambiguously clear about where the devil was. “If negative goodness was religion, then one of these lamp-posts out here would be the best Christian in town; it never cursed, nor swore; nor drank a drop since it was made; it never did anything wrong.”<sup>85</sup> Much of Jones’ definition of what being a Christian entailed—not all, but much—consisted in such “negative goodness,” refraining from idle entertainments that beckoned at every turn on the street corners. “Watch the association of your children. Do not allow your boys to go with young, rich debauchees for the money. Why, some of these scoundrels can get drunk on Saturday night and then on Sunday evening go to church with the sweetest girl in the family. We need some old-fashioned daddies who would meet these young bucks at the door and kick them clean out into the street.”<sup>86</sup> “What is a little party?” he asked, “it is nothing but a big party with short clothes on. What is a big party? It is nothing in the world but the anteroom to a ballroom. And what is a ballroom? It is the anteroom to a german. And what is a german? It is the anteroom to eternal disgrace. And what is eternal disgrace? It is hell-fire.” The location of evil was transparent: “every barroom is a recruiting office for hell.” And “no man can be a

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<sup>83</sup> Mrs. Sam P. Jones, *The Life and Sayings of Sam P. Jones* (Atlanta: Franklin-Turner, 1906):454, 463

<sup>84</sup> *Life and Sayings* 447

<sup>85</sup> *Life and Sayings* 442

<sup>86</sup> *Life and Sayings* 427

Christian and drink whisky.” Or, “you dance with this world and you’ll go to hell with this world.”<sup>87</sup>

Jones envisioned the home as a haven from alluring entertainments, and was adamant that no impurities should be allowed to creep in. “Don’t allow your boys to learn gambling at home, and then you, in a hypocritical old age, go around bewailing their fate. A woman in Chicago told me her husband worked hard all day, and she played cards with him every night to amuse him. I told her to ship him to an asylum, for there they play cards for amusement. A game of cards is the game of starvelings, mentally and spiritually.”<sup>88</sup> Careful control of the home dramatized and taught the virtue of self-control, and Jones insisted no conscientiously responsible person would beseech God for a mysterious deliverance that ought to begin with their own willful choice. “God never does anything for a man that he can do for himself. The Lord is too busy for that—to be doing things for men that they can do themselves. God never quit drinking for any man; that is the man’s own lookout. God never quit lying for anybody; that is your own job. God never quit stealing for anybody; that is your own business to look after.” And “God never prayed in any man’s family for him; God never took up anybody’s cross for him. There is a great deal of this work of salvation on your own shoulders, and my great desire is to take hold of men and pull them up where God can save them. I say it is a moral impossibility for God to take a man to heaven when every stop of that man’s life is downward and hellward.”<sup>89</sup> What transpired in home, society, or church was determined by individual choice. “Going to church is like going shopping: you generally get what you go for—no more and no less.” And those wallowing in

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<sup>87</sup> *Life and Sayings* 446, 435, 433, 463

<sup>88</sup> *Life and Sayings* 423

<sup>89</sup> *Life and Sayings* 439, 448

vice had to find their own way out first: “there is nothing in grace that will make you a sober man with a quart of whisky in your stomach.”<sup>90</sup>

Jones (like Gates) was not a secular moralist, but a sense of mystery or the paradoxes in the inwardness of the soul was scarcely apparent, and when Jones invoked Hell or the Devil it was in an anthropocentric style, as extensions of human vice. “What is hell at last? It is the very quintessence of selfishness and selfishness is hell. There is not an element in hell that does not enter into selfishness, and the supremely selfish man has already lighted the fires of hell in his soul that shall burn forever.” The devil became a metaphor for the vices that the laws of a good society should punish. “The difference between the devil and the penitentiary is, that the penitentiary works you hard and boards you, but the devil puts you to the meanest, dirtiest jobs in the world, and makes you board yourself.” One should beware of getting seduced by such mean and dirty jobs, and instead cultivate upright self-respect. “Quit your meanness, and tell God you mean it, if you wish to be saved.” The positive side of quitting meanness, or personally defeating the Devil and Hell, was the task of tangible moral improvement. “Character is immortal. Character shall live on beyond the stars. Character shall live as long as God lives. Character-building is the one work of true men in this world.” Thus Jones worked for a social order decisively shaped by character. “We want a revival of righteousness. We want a revival of honesty. We want a revival of cleanliness and purity.”<sup>91</sup>

While in popular association Jones and Gates’ message seems one of old-fashioned, repressive Victorian morality, puritanical inspiration for blue laws, and such, in context it was an innovatively optimistic message: evil could be located, controlled, and avoided; “Satan” could be subdued. By contrast, a sense of suprahuman evil haunts the messages of Johnson and Louvin:

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<sup>90</sup> *Life and Sayings* 428, 426

<sup>91</sup> *Life and Sayings* 426, 442, 425, 451, 443

the force of darkness is a basic element of human life, the struggle is perennial, and it is waged in the Christian's own soul—not in tangible behaviors or places from which the upright person of character can willfully refrain. Jones and Gates' message promoted ideas of respectability, and the standing that one had in the estimations of others was critical to their sensibility. It was an ethic of shame. By contrast, the message of Johnson and Louvin pushed its gaze inward, to the unseen struggles of the soul and the darker feelings that barely had social visibility. It was an ethic of guilt, and the driving concern was to be right in the eyes of a very present and close God. The struggle was in the hidden heart—not on city streets or in the market.

Focusing in on these four preachers, keeping in mind the lurking presence of the Devil in the lives of rural people, we can make sense of a perhaps still lingering association: that rural people did have a stringent code of morality. The above pages have argued that this “puritanical” code was an innovation of the bourgeoisie, and that its view of evil was not the one that dominated rural Protestantism. Yet there is some evidence that rural people appropriated aspects of this bourgeois code. Of her youth in Poor Valley, Virginia in the 30s and early 40s, June Carter Cash recalled, “I grew up being afraid to wear make-up, afraid to dance, afraid to wear a basketball suit because it wasn't modest...life to me was four square miles of going to grandmother's, over to aunts and uncles, worming tobacco, hoeing corn, and milking cows...Somewhere out there, over the mountains, there was a world of hamburgers, ice cream cones, and movie stars. Out there the preacher would let you play basketball, and you could buy a real tube of lipstick—and you could dance.”<sup>92</sup> J.R. Cash's letters to his fiancée Vivian (1950-1954), when he was fresh off the farm and stationed by the Air Force in Germany, reveal anguished concerns about alcohol use and the social world of parties and card-playing.<sup>93</sup> In the

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<sup>92</sup> June Carter Cash, *Among My Klediments* 22

<sup>93</sup> Vivian Cash with Ann Sharpsteen, *I Walked the Line: My Life with Johnny*

black tenant community of Gee's Bend in the late 30s, the local churches expelled members for, among other things, dancing, playing cards, playing ball, and gambling.<sup>94</sup> Based upon fieldwork in four counties in the mid-40s, Harry Richardson concluded that it was a regular thing for the rural black preacher to inveigh against "the sin of dancing and playing cards."<sup>95</sup> In the mountains of western North Carolina in the first decades of the century, Presbyterian missionary R.P. Smith found that people who were not church members associated Christianity with the idea "that they must quit certain conduct, dancing, playing cards and other amusements."<sup>96</sup> In eastern Kentucky Jim Garland's father Oliver "did not sing love ballads since he was a Baptist preacher and the church looked down on such singing," and Vera Hall, the gifted singer that Alan Lomax recorded in the 30s and 40s, remembered that "the church officers tried to handle me once before when I sang that blues for the white gentlemen. I told those old deacons the truth, say, 'I *did* sing the blues. I give um the words and showed them how the tune went—just tryin to do what I was asked to do; but that didn't have no effect on my religion."<sup>97</sup>

Pieces of evidence like this, though they are nowhere as numerous as those demonstrating belief in the Devil, do show that some rural people appropriated some elements of the new Protestant ethos, that they too could define evil as "bad." This may have operated to instill some social self-respect in rural people by calling them to refrain from "trashy" and vulgar amusements. For a people who were already deemed inferior in the culture of the New South (chapter 3), such a summons may have had special meaning. We can also see, pointedly in June Carter Cash's recollection, the alluring but distant presence of possibilities of consumption and display. If the new Protestant ethos emerged in the context of new markets, the reach of such

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<sup>94</sup> Nathaniel Colley, "Exploratory Study" 10-11

<sup>95</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 91

<sup>96</sup> R.P. Smith, *Experiences in Mountain Mission Work* 79

<sup>97</sup> Julia Ardery, ed. *Welcome the Traveler Home: Jim Garland's Story of the Kentucky Mountains* 57; Alan Lomax, *The Rainbow Sign* 103

markets into the lives of rural people presented starker options. Rural people were cash-poor, and frittering away scarce cash on amusements could have far more disruptive consequences than simply engaging with idle fun. “All my life,” J.R. Cash wrote Vivian in 1952, “drinking has been associated with hungry kids and unhappy homes.” “We were in misery part of the time,” he explained, “not cold, and never hungry, but every penny had to go for essential things.”<sup>98</sup>

Still, these clear and tangible moralisms were hardly the dominant tone in rural Protestantism, and solid evidence indicates that upright abstention from idle amusements, or the idea that such amusements were the essence of evil, were not defining features of people’s lives. In his extensive 1949 study of rural black churches and homes, Ralph Felton found church people moving regularly from the frolic of a Saturday night to the worship of a Sunday morning. In one Alabama village that Felton depicted as emblematic, country people gathered on a Saturday afternoon, some going on to the secluded “Nodding Rock,” others staying in the village to, as one man put it, “drink whisky, dance, put our money in the juke box and we shoots crap.” The following morning, “from out of the cabins through the woods and along the roads literally hundreds of people came” on their way to the churches.<sup>99</sup> Though she heard sanctions against certain forms of dancing, at regular all-night square dances in Poor Valley June Carter Cash watched as her mother Maybelle developed the “Carter Scratch” on the guitar.<sup>100</sup> Historian Paul Conkin recalls that across the mountains in Greene County, Tennessee, Saturday night dances were a regular feature in the 1920s and that “hot sparking happened after church every Sunday night.”<sup>101</sup> Singer of spirituals and devout church member Vera Hall spoke unashamedly of rural people’s routine festivities. “The white folks will get in there with us on Saturday nights and kick

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<sup>98</sup> Vivian Cash with Anne Sharpsteen, *I Walked the Line* 77-78, 71

<sup>99</sup> Ralph Felton, *These My Brethren* 54

<sup>100</sup> June Carter Cash, *Among My Klediments* 64

<sup>101</sup> Paul Conkin, “Black Zack and Uncle Amon” in James Klotter, ed. *The Human Tradition in the New South* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005):26

out more sport than us because they got more money than we got. We'll stash one, maybe, in my house...I'll hide him in there, if I know him and he's all right and just want to have some place to get him a *smile* (*what this dry town calls a drink*), you know, without anybody knowin..."<sup>102</sup>

In a similar vein, R.P. Smith contrasted a temperance meeting in town with rural mountaineers' practice of distilling.<sup>103</sup>

Alcohol, dancing, and music were not the only "idle" pleasures for rural people.

Tuskegee student Nathaniel Colley found that "sexual intercourse seems to have become a major form of recreation and entertainment" for the tenants of Gee's Bend, and Carter Woodson

lamented that "sexual indulgence is a popular recreation for most rural people of both races."<sup>104</sup>

In their own memories of life in Dyess, A.J. Henson and J.E. Huff recall the earthy pleasure of

"girls," and in his 1997 memoir Johnny Cash recalled that by 1947 he began to emerge from the

"deep darkness" following Jack's death in 1944: "what *really* got me moving, of course, was sex.

By about fifteen I'd discovered girls. They did a pretty good job with my loneliness."<sup>105</sup> Alan

Lomax noted favorably that the principal characters in his study of black folk religion—Vera

Hall and Rev. Renfrew—"reached their sexual maturity early and pleasureably; both finding love

and love-making easy and natural."<sup>106</sup> For AMA missionary and black minister Orishatukeh

Faduma, the source of such behavior was no mystery: "the environments of country life

encourage illicit living, and to men already reared among them are a snare."<sup>107</sup> Missionary Mary

Livermore came closer to the source when she appealed to bourgeois reformers to work with the

typical tenant and "improve his home...enlighten his ignorance, give him innocent

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<sup>102</sup> Alan Lomax, *Rainbow Sign* 109

<sup>103</sup> R.P. Smith, *Experiences* 111

<sup>104</sup> Nathaniel Colley, "Exploratory Study" 20; Carter Woodson, *Rural Negro* 136

<sup>105</sup> Author interviews with A.J. Henson and J.E. Huff, January 9-10, 2006; Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 37-38

<sup>106</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Rainbow Sign* 16

<sup>107</sup> Orishatukeh Faduma, "Defects of the Negro Church" 7-8

recreation.”<sup>108</sup> For the real issue was one of different ideals, and rural conceptions of evil were not—to the dire concern of missionaries of uprightness—incompatible with the earthy frolic of a Saturday night.<sup>109</sup>

But isn't there a long-established image of the person from the rural South, particularly the musician, torn between enjoyment of pleasure and the teachings of a strict morality? Rosetta Tharpe, the gospel singer who began to sing blues and thus became a great “sinner,” and Jerry Lee Lewis, the rockabilly who played “the devil’s music” and whose hedonism was a repudiation of the religion of his youth, are two of the more notable lives imagined in this model, but the model pervades scholarship on the blues and country.<sup>110</sup> Some of this confusion is based on the assumption that rural people internalized bourgeois morality, but much of it also has to do with the new force of Holiness/Pentecostalism, and with a blurring of categories that has interpreted them as renewals of the stringent “old time religion.” As its better historians have shown, they were marked by innovation, and it is no accident that Pentecostalism began not in backwoods Alabama but in Los Angeles. Pentecostalism upped the ante of expectation for religious experience and demanded a code of behavior more stringent than the bourgeois Protestant ethos. As brilliantly captured in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*,

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<sup>108</sup> *Our Home Field* October 1911

<sup>109</sup> In his pathbreaking study of country blues, Jeff Todd Titon argues that “Black Belt society was fluid, not rigid; people shared the same experience of ‘church culture’ and ‘blues culture’” and that “the church and the blues were structural and functional counterparts.” Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1994):18

<sup>110</sup> See Nick Tosches, *Hellfire* (New York: Grove, 1982) and Bill Malone, *Country Music USA* 250 on Jerry Lee Lewis as a paradigmatic great “sinner;” Anthony Heilbut, *The Gospel Sound: Good News and Bad Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997):193 and Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes 3* on Sister Rosetta Tharpe’s flagrantly shocking turn to the blues. Basic works on country and blues that use this model are Samuel Charters, *The Bluesmen* (New York: Oak, 1967); Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University, 1977):237; William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1989); David Evans, “Charley Patton: The Conscience of the Delta” in *Screamin and Hollerin the Blues* (Revenant Records, 2001); Wim Winders’ film *The Soul of a Man* in the series *Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues: A Musical Journey* (2003); and Bill Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002). John Lomax made the sharp contrast between “sacred” songs and “sinful” songs (about any subject other than religion) basic to his recollections of folk culture. See John Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).



Pentecostalism drew sharp lines between “sinners” and “saints,” and it took the bourgeois code further by prohibiting the slightest enjoyment of consumer culture. “And certainly perdition sucked at the feet of the people who walked there,” the protagonist John thought as he surveyed the New York streets, “and cried in the lights, in the gigantic towers; the marks of Satan could be found in the faces of the people who waited at the doors of movie houses...He looked straight ahead, down Fifth Avenue, where graceful women in fur coats walked, looking into the windows that held silk dresses, and watches, and rings. What church did they go to?...But no, for their thoughts were not of God, and their way was not God’s way.”<sup>111</sup> John’s great sin and the novel’s turning point is his purchase of a movie ticket, for it signifies his own willful identification with the ways of the sinners.

Holiness/Pentecostalism was a national movement, but it did begin to gain some converts in the rural South. In the eastern Kentucky mountains, Jim Garland recalled, “the Holiness believed they had found a cleaner, purer religion. They wouldn’t dip snuff, chew tobacco, or smoke cigarettes, and they looked down on all forms of dancing.” By contrast, the older churches “believed that all people sinned a little...[and] were fairly tolerant of folk dancing and parties. But the newer Holiness church...demanded that its members live without sin, just like Jesus Christ.”<sup>112</sup> Alan Lomax contrasted rural black folk religion with “the urban Holiness cults,” and argued that they were “notably more Puritan than the older Baptist church...Holiness singing is more tense than the older spiritual style.”<sup>113</sup> Paying close attention to geography and timing, Edward Ayers found that Holiness/Pentecostal churches “were not located in the backwaters...but in the very places that had experienced the greatest change over the preceding fifty years,” and that they flourished insofar as they “inverted the cultural values being

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<sup>111</sup> James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (New York: Laurel, 1985 [originally 1952]):33-35

<sup>112</sup> Julia Ardery, ed. *Welcome the Traveler Home* 81, 86

<sup>113</sup> Alan Lomax, *Rainbow Sign* 17

disseminated throughout the South by towns, railroads, and advertising.”<sup>114</sup> However, in the New South era, membership in Holiness and Pentecostal churches was still extremely small, less than 1% of rural church membership, compared to 54% Baptist and 29.6% Methodist. While such churches nurtured a disproportionate number of popular musicians (Tharpe, Lewis, Elvis Presley, Little Richard being the most notable), people whose struggle between the confined culture of the “saints” and the open frivolity of the “sinners” may have been heartfelt and personal, in the rural world of the New South era such ideas were peripheral. In the dominant rural belief, God and the Devil did not command opposing camps named “saints” and “sinners,” but rather fought in the Christian’s soul, and the force of darkness was too pervasive and unpredictable to be located in a discrete action like purchasing a movie ticket.

To return to the images with which we began, what observers both saw and did not see may now be turned around to make more sense. Borrowing on Jackson Lears’ insight, the emotionalism that reformers saw may now be seen as the other side of fervent, palpable belief in the power of the Devil and the possibility of Hell. Continuing and rearticulating this older sense of evil in their lives in the New South, the rural poor did not lose “possibilities for ecstasy,” nor did the “intense yearning for salvation” wane in their religious life. They experienced the power of darkness, a terror that often came unexpected and in moments of weakness, and in their soul or heart they fought against this Devil. God delivered in the present, and to apprehend God’s power was to be overcome with ecstasy. “Just what do you mean by salvation, Uncle?” Mississippi planter Howard Snyder asked one of his black tenants in 1919. “ ‘Well, sir, Boss, when you goes to the church and see them girls goin’ like this’—here,” Snyder wrote, “Uncle Albert began an uncanny wail like that of a screech owl if only it could be magnified a hundred fold—‘when you see them girls do this you can know the Lord is come, and when you see us lay

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<sup>114</sup> Edward Ayers, *Promise of the New South* 407-408

them out in the pulpit you can know the Lord is hammerin' old Satan out of them. This is salvation."<sup>115</sup> A generation later, one of the people demonstrating exactly what Albert described was J.R. Cash's mother Carrie, in the mid-40s in the Baptist church after the heartbreaking experience of losing her son.<sup>116</sup>

In a 1939 sermon in a rural Baptist church in Wise County, Virginia, white preacher Carlos Williams was adamant that the power of God was to be felt in the present. He warned against the heresy that Jesus was "just a spirit," and went on to explain that Jesus' own earthy humanity meant that it was in this earthy life that the Christian experienced God's power: "I'm gonna tell you today Jesus was a man just like me/ and that's the reason he come into the world he was a kin to his people/ brethren there's a relationship there and I want you to know today that if Jesus hadn't a been/ if he hadn't a been a man/ he wouldn't a cared nothing about the man/ and that's the reason he died for him/ and I want you to know he never died for just a spirit because he didn't need to die for a spirit/ but the man is what Jesus had under consideration/ and brethren when you get away from that you're gonna die/ a get that in your mind/ I've never seen your brother get away from that yet but what he didn't go into the darkness...brethren stay in Christ/ stay in Jesus/ and he said I in you and you in me/ I in the Father and the Father in me/ and brethren I want you to understand today Jesus said the kingdom is within you/ and that's the reason the kingdom is within you because Jesus is within you/ brethren and you in him/ and there's the kingdom don't you see/ and it's down here on the earth too don't you see..."<sup>117</sup>

Across the mountains in Pineville, Kentucky, white Methodist preacher Sherwin Sizemore told a congregation of miners that they need not be ashamed of ecstatic displays when overcome by the power of Jesus: "you know there's a lot of people in the churches today don't believe in the

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<sup>115</sup> Howard Snyder, "A Plantation Revival Service" *Yale Review* 10:1 (October 1920):174

<sup>116</sup> Author interview with J.E. Huff, January 10, 2006

<sup>117</sup> Carlos Williams, sermon 3/39 Archive of Folk Culture AFS 2769A-B2

people of God dancing/ and everybody to sit still and let the preacher do all of the work.” That was not the behavior of “the old prophet David/ a good man/ and a man after God’s own heart/ I want to say he got so happy one time that the folks mocked at him/ and a lot of times they mock at us today/ I want to say we need the very same spirit and zeal in our lives that old David had.”<sup>118</sup>

A rural black preacher argued that God’s Spirit was elusive and mysterious but no less real in its effects than the corn meal that was a staple of the rural diet. The Spirit could be not understood, he said, but then “we are doing things every day that we do not understand. You cannot understand how it is that you can go to your meal-bag and take out some meal from the bag. You make bread out of it; you cook it, and you eat it. It puts blood in you; it gives you strength; it gives you life. You cannot understand how it is that you go to the same meal-bag; you get out some more of the same meal; you give it to your cow; it gives you butter; it gives you beef steak; it puts blood in your veins...” Experiencing the mysterious power of the Spirit should cause ecstatic behavior. “I want you to shout,” he commanded. “Nowadays, people think it is a shame to shout; they are afraid to shout; they are afraid someone will laugh at them. They shout seldom, because someone will think they are drunk. They think it is a disgrace to shout. You ought to have the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and you would not be ashamed to shout...Has the Spirit been your leader? I say, I wonder has the Spirit been your guide? I heard my captain say that He was the Spirit. My Lord! My Lord! Talk about the Holy Spirit, it has struck me down in my heart. It has set the wheel turning in my heart. He will be my guide at the midnight hour.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Sherwin Sizemore, sermon 1/38 Archive of Folk Culture AFS 1958A-1960A

<sup>119</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* 246

Preachers admonished their listeners to “stay in Jesus,” to follow the guide of the Spirit, because in this life there was no final victory over evil. Ecstatic experiences of God were but intimations of a future wholeness, and in life the joy of ecstasy was always balanced by the terror of the Devil. Only in hope could the Christian break entirely free from the assaults of Satan. In the mid-30s Vera Hall and her cousin Dock Reed sang a modernized adaptation of an older spiritual: “One day, one day, I was walkin’ along/ I met old Satan on my way/ what you reckon old Satan said to me?/ young man, young man, you’re too young to pray/ if I’m too young to pray I ain’t too young to die/ oh, free at last, free at last/ old Satan mad and I’m glad/ well, he missed the soul that he thought he had.”<sup>120</sup> A few years earlier, as he picked cotton in an eastern Oklahoma field, Albert Brumley mused over the hillbilly radio hit “The Prisoner’s Song,” and realized that its imagery could be a metaphor for the life of the Christian. He composed a song of eschatological freedom that quickly became a staple in rural churches: “some glad morning when this life is o’er/ I’ll fly away/ to that home on God’s celestial shore/ I’ll fly away...when the shadows of this life have gone/ I’ll fly away/ like a bird from prison bars has flown/ I’ll fly away.”<sup>121</sup> Brumley’s composition is often criticized for its sentimentality, as a rosy picture of sanguine emotionalism, but this charge, like the one of “mere emotionalism,” overlooks the context in which such a hope for future freedom made sense.

The intense longing for divine deliverance and the momentary self-abandonment of ecstasy were intrinsic to a mentality that imagined evil as a palpable force of destructiveness in life. They were also the basic tangible manifestations of a mentality that the Protestant bourgeoisie came to regard as primitive. This social dynamic may seem puzzling to contemporary historians working with the model that oppressed peoples’ culture is a form of

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<sup>120</sup> Vera Hall and Dock Reed, “Free at Last” *Goodbye, Babylon*

<sup>121</sup> Dorothy Horstman, *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation, 1996):50

resistance that asserts their worth and claims a place for their social respect. Fervent belief in the Devil and displays of ecstasy did not further rural people's status, but instead accentuated a sense of difference and cultural inferiority. Furthermore, by the lights of another historical model that interprets religion as a psychological "tool" that the poor and oppressed employ to cope with their hardships, articulating and practicing an ominous sense of evil and a perpetual struggle in one's soul did not make anyone's life any easier; it would seem that the new Protestant ethos of optimism and self-control would have had much more appeal.

This latter dynamic—of perpetual and ominous struggle—is the key to the New South meaning of the rural Protestant sense of evil. The early pages of this chapter sketched the transforming New South urban context in which the regional bourgeoisie articulated a new ethos. This was to emphasize that what is often regarded as an "old-fashioned" morality was actually a modernizing innovation. This emphasis should not be taken to imply that by contrast the lives of rural people, or their sense of evil, were static and unchanging. As the previous chapter demonstrated, rural people lived and moved in a transforming world, but one that involved many different experiences than those of the emergent middle class. Rural people faced increasing confinement: fewer options, declining social status, and the bitter knowledge that hard work hardly guaranteed stability, much less mobility. In this confining context, one that nursed a song like "I'll Fly Away," rural Protestants invested older images of personified and suprahuman evil with new meanings. Christine Heyrman has described how in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the incipient evangelicals dramatized a visceral sense of the Devil in a way that shocked and disturbed many in the region. By the 1820s, evangelical leaders had pushed Satan to the background and presented a more optimistic and ordered sense of evil.<sup>122</sup> There are

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<sup>122</sup> Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997):28-76

currently gaps in the scholarship that allow only questions: did the early sense of an ominous Satan persist after the 1820s underneath the radar of denominational control? Did evangelicals, both leaders and laity, move rather unanimously away from that older sense as their once-upstart movement became regionally dominant?

At any rate, in the New South era, rural Protestants again made Satan a visceral presence. Their Satan, like that of the early evangelicals, possessed meaning within a certain context—it was not static and timeless anymore than the lives of rural people were. While the rural Protestant sense of evil clearly had in more in common with an older Christian tradition than the emergent nineteenth century bourgeois conception of evil as “bad,” its enactment and constant reiteration in the New South era was marked by new meanings. The Satan against which the rural Protestant struggled was radically unpredictable and highly personalized. The rural Protestant had to struggle with, in folklorist Bruce Grindal’s perceptive phrases, a “brute force of fragmentary purpose in the guise of a taste of honey,” the terror of an “inner compulsion that...drives one to self-destruction.”<sup>123</sup> Yet this struggle happened largely without the more traditional supports of church, metaphysical structure, or ritual. Stories and songs dramatized this by depicting Satan attacking in the solitude of sleep, alone in the field, in an isolating voice that drove one away from others. What Mathews argued for white Protestantism in the New South—that it “encouraged the mental, moral, and emotional process of pushing ‘everything dark, dangerous, and evil’ to ‘the rim of one’s life’—may describe the spirit of the bourgeoisie, but hardly that of rural Protestants, whose mentality, as Harry Richardson argued, was about “learning to live with trouble, rather than to flee it.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Bruce Grindal, “Religious Interpretation” in Hall and Stack, eds. *Holding On* 97

<sup>124</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 90

Certainly rural people experienced plenty of trouble in the New South era. In their religion they articulated this trouble, and proclaimed the constant need to struggle against it. In the musings of the white Kentucky coal miner—“sometimes...I feel there’s forgiveness in this world”—or the black Alabama sharecropper—“maybe *this* is Hell”—the temptation to give in to despair is scarcely below the surface. From his fieldwork in Macon County, Alabama in the early 30s, Fisk sociologist Charles Johnson recorded this story:

My husband was an intelligent man. He nearly finished Tuskegee. He had worked hard but we lost all that we had. On his fiftieth birthday, the twenty-fourth of November, we worked in the field all day and he kept saying he wouldn’t be here long, and he wanted us to hurry up and get the cotton picked. It made me nervous. Every time he’d come home I’d send the boy behind him ‘cause I didn’t know what he might do. We took some potash from him one night. He wouldn’t eat no supper. When I got through supper I was reading a ‘true story.’ I likes to read *True Stories* and he knowed so much he took it from me and told me ter stop reading that junk. Hit was on Thanksgiving Day and they was bringing my girl home from Tuskegee School to visit. I always will believe that he lost his mind, for he got outta bed and wandered out dere in the field. Then he got holt of some more potash and et it, and died and never said what he lost hisself fer. He just suicided and killed hisself.<sup>125</sup>

Perhaps in a different context this widow would have said that her husband lost his mind to the Devil; certainly many others in the region framed life in those terms. In this they drew on traditional images, used them to name the darkness that threatened to swallow up their lives, and in the process creatively articulated their own sense that evil was suprahuman, a constant but unpredictable assailant, and one that ultimately was fought in the inwardness of the soul.

Looking at the religious speech of rural Protestants with H.L. Mencken’s objectified amazement—“ghosts and hobgoblins are still as real to the peasants, white and black, as they were to the villeins of the Middle Ages”—gets us nowhere interpretively.<sup>126</sup> It misses the deeply interiorized struggles of rural Protestants, as well as their poeticized sense that Satan was less a metaphysical being than a vivid “force of fragmentary purpose.”

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<sup>125</sup> Charles Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1934):144

<sup>126</sup> Fred Hobson, *Serpent in Eden: H.L. Mencken and the South* 54



This sense of evil as perennial, inward trouble did not push people outward toward the moral reform of society, and bourgeois criticisms that it was not actively transforming communities in tangible ways had a degree of accuracy. But the laments that rural churches practiced “mere emotionalism” or were “otherworldly” should be radically revised. The visible displays of ecstasy were part of a larger conception of the Christian life as a perpetual struggle in the soul, and the struggle, if hidden, was very much this-worldly. The white farm laborer who described this life as a test and his own temptation to be a “fly” was adamant that his religion shirked no burdens, that in fact it was intimately about everyday life:

I'm just a bad soul, trying to get as good as possible, before I'm called. I'd hate to be judged today, this very day. It would be Hell for me, a long time of it, for sure. But if you pray, if you keep God close to you, and try to let Him guide you, every day, every week, 'all the years of your life,' like the minister says, then you are trying and He'll notice...A lot of people, they're wanting an easy drive up there to Heaven, that's what. They think they can go to Church on Sundays, and strike a bargain with Him. They think an hour or two on Sunday, or around Christmas and Easter, and when they die, they'll see a sign, and it'll say: Heaven, and the Lord will be yonder, on the hill, waiting, with a smile on His face. That's soft religion; that's faking. It's no good religion. It's a waste of time. Our religion is hard; it's a hard, hard religion. We're in trouble, and we may not get where we want to be going, but we're going to try...<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Robert Coles, *Flannery O'Connor's South* 61

## CHAPTER 5

### LIMINALITY AND THE *VIA NEGATIVA*

*“If you want to see Jesus, go in the wilderness”*

*“Jesus fed me when I was hungry  
He clothed me when I was naked  
He gave me drink when I was dry”<sup>1</sup>*

It was during the mid-day break, after the morning service but before the afternoon one, that twelve-year-old Rosie Reed skipped dinner and instead took her cousin to a secluded place on the river. She recounted the formative events of that Sunday many years later:

So when they [everyone gathered for church, including her parents] all got out of sight, me and Zadio (we was right by the river at the old Brush Creek Church) went up the river to an old sheltering rock and we walked in between them rocks. I looked at her and said, ‘Zadio, do you know how to pray?’ She said, ‘No, I don’t. Papaw does the praying.’ I said, ‘I don’t know how. For Daddy and Mother both prays. And I don’t.’ We stood and looked at each other for a while and she said, ‘Well, we could say, “God, be merciful to us a sinner” for we’re sinners.’ We knelt and prayed and cried. We didn’t know what to say... We cried and cried and when they came back to the church, we ran down to the river and washed our faces and pushed our hair and went on into the church.

Rosie heard nothing the preacher said. A terrible anxiety had come over her with an importunate sense that *now* was the time—if it got to be any later, death might grab hold of her before Jesus did.

I like to cried my heart out. I said, ‘God, if you don’t save me now, I’m going to die. I’ve done everything I know how to do and I don’t know anything else to do.’ When I said that, an awful feeling came over me. I was mashed down low and lower. I couldn’t hear them singing or nothin. I felt like I was going through the floor. All at once, it begun to come up like that. And when it come up, there I was standing in the floor. Everything was as bright as sunshine. I jumped just as high as I could. I jumped and grabbed Uncle Isaac [the preacher and her uncle] and hugged him. My daddy was just parting the people

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<sup>1</sup> Fragments of two common folk songs, transcribed 1909 by Howard Odum, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Southern Negroes* 25-27

trying to get to me. Well, I thought they was the prettiest people I'd ever seen in all my life. Never after that did I doubt my experience.<sup>2</sup>

Though Reed was literally surrounded by people, on the day in the rural calendar that was certainly the most sociable, solitude pervades the narrative: she skips the sociability of dinner to seek God with a lone companion by the riverside, is overcome by an “awful feeling” that seems to tear her away from the fellowship of others, and is only able to touch kin after her decisive experience. There is also a raw earthiness in the story: praying between the rocks, washing her face in the river's water, getting mashed down into the floor only to be stood back up again, and then seeing pretty people with everything “bright as sunshine.” And Reed narrates her own insufficiency, not knowing how to pray, not being able to do anything else, pleading for God to rescue her.

Reed's family were small farmers in western North Carolina, white mountaineers, and the experience she described happened sometime in the late 1890s during service at a Baptist church. She told the story many times in her long life, particularly in church as a “testimony,” and it left a powerful impression on many local people.

Born in the black tenant and small farming community of Downsville, Texas, on the edge of the rich bottomlands of the Brazos River valley, Roosevelt Fields recalled established rituals of rural church life that remained strong in his youth in the 1950s. “I come up under the old-timey religion. I come up under the mourners bench...the old folks didn't have—they didn't get no education, but they knew the Lord, and because they knew the Lord it was important that we as children knew the Lord.” Fields' parents read the Bible to him at home, taught him songs, and told him stories of experience. Fields recalled the outlines of one story he heard time and again about an experience of his father in the 1940s:

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Gillespie and Keith Head, “Granny Reed: A Testimony” *Southern Exposure* 4:3 (1976):34

My father, he didn't receive his in the sanctuary, but he said he was down in the bottoms and he was just praying and he was—he asked the Lord to show him a sign, and you know, but he had been praying and God just showed him exactly the sign that he asked for, and he said—you know, he just come up out of that bottom just running and crying, telling people the Lord had saved his soul.

Like Rosie Reed, Mr. Fields sought God in solitude, down in the river bottoms, and it was only after his decisive sign that he returned to human fellowship. The sketch of his narrative has similar metaphors of passivity—receiving and being shown—and Fields' ecstatic response to his experience parallels Reed's. His son recalled the importance of such narrative formulations of religious experience by "the old folks": "I think that's one of the things that helped us, that testimony service. Other people's testimony help us get a chance to know the Lord, you know...the Lord told the Israelites—I keep going back to this but, you know, he said, 'Tell your children the things that I have done for you.'"<sup>3</sup>

In the period for which Reed's and Fields' narratives may serve as bookends, such recountings of religious experience—"testimonies"—not only flourished in rural churches, but in repeated communal tellings they took on stock features. As the old passed on narratives of experience to the young, their oral instruction shaped distinct expectations of what religious experience ought to look like, and in the process expressed a theology marked by a paradoxical solitude, a raw earthiness, and metaphors of human insufficiency. This chapter explores this oral form, the testimony, and its stock features: meeting God in the wilderness or in the solitude of ecstasy, without the supports of others, with feelings of incapacity and often resistance. The testimonies articulated an apophatic theology, a Protestant *via negativa*, in which God was found on the margins of ordinary life. This consistent and regularized conception contrasts with what historians have found for much of the history of Protestantism in the South: that it has been rather closely accommodated to white social power or that it has become deeply entwined with

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<sup>3</sup> Roosevelt Fields interview 5/14/99, Baylor Institute for Oral History

racial strivings for social respect. Instead, the liminal God of the testimonies was found at the outer margins of human experience, identified with neither social order nor race, encountered through both liberating and burdensome individuation.

Historians of the urban Protestant experience in the New South have not uncovered such narratives—except as “primitive” practices from which townspeople sought to distance themselves. Rather, they have accumulated significant evidence to buttress historian Paul Harvey’s synthetic statement in his 2005 *Freedom’s Coming*: “religious leaders in black and white churches encouraged the practices of respectable churches and vilified customs such as vision quests, dreams, ecstatic conversion experiences and testimonies,” and in the process sought to “inculcate mental and behavioral modernity among their parishioners.”<sup>4</sup> These “primitive” features, and especially the sense of human passivity or insufficiency that they evoked, were ill-suited to the code of respectability and self-control so vital to the self-understanding of the New South’s emergent bourgeoisie.<sup>5</sup> “I used to think that every old sinner was in a wilderness of sin and that it would take him a week to find the road out,” Sam Jones argued for the new ethos at the turn of the century, “but I’ve found out now that when a man’s converted all he has to do is to turn right about.”<sup>6</sup> In the midst of the New South era, Fisk sociologist Charles Johnson noted in 1930 that dramatic conversion stories had come to be “associated with Negroes, mountain folk, and the ‘downtrodden poor.’”<sup>7</sup> Under Johnson’s

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming* 115

<sup>5</sup> For this new ethos in the postbellum era, see especially Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South* 77-135; Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* 185-229; and Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan* 116-121. In chapter 1, I argued that Ownby’s “rural South” is not that of the rural poor, but rather substantial landowners and, more commonly, small townspeople.

<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Sam P. Jones, *Life and Sayings* 512

<sup>7</sup> Charles Johnson, Introduction in Clifton Johnson, ed. *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-Slaves* (Boston: Pilgrim, 1969): xvii

direction at Fisk, graduate student Andrew Watson sought out such stories for his 1932 master's thesis, "Primitive Religion Among Negroes in Tennessee."<sup>8</sup>

In his 1930 study *The Rural Negro*, Carter Woodson described the emblematic role of testimonies in rural black churches with a sense of distance and disdain: "while in a state of prayer for deliverance from sin, [the convert] falls into a trance, prostrate like a man in dying condition...He gradually awakens from his stupor, usually saying with a peculiarly primitive intonation: 'Thank God! Thank God! Thank God I was born to die! He snatched me like a brand from eternal burning and saved me from hell's dark door....All the candidate needs to do is to convince the brethren that he had some such experience as they themselves had—that he saw a light, heard a voice, had a vision, outwitted the devil, or received a visit from Jesus. With such a straight story they find ready acceptance in the church.'"<sup>9</sup> In the predominantly white small farming and tenant community of Gorgas in the Alabama hills, a college-educated minister had taken steps to curb such practices. An older man recalled typical scenes from his youth in the 1880s. "Folks would go off [from the church] into the woods to pray late in the afternoons, the men going off to one side and the women to the other. Along about dusk after they had got religion they'd come out of the trees shouting so loud the woods would ring. You couldn't hear your ears." He recounted this in 1934-35 as a lament; "those were the days of real religion," he told sociologists Paul Terry and Verner Sims.<sup>10</sup>

Under attack from denominational reformers and a formally educated class that regarded such practices as retrograde, testimonies and their attendant practices nevertheless flourished

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, ed. *God Struck Me Dead* xix

<sup>9</sup> Carter Woodson, *The Rural Negro* 163-164

<sup>10</sup> Paul Terry and Verner Sims, *They Live on the Land* 10

across the region in the New South era, and in some places they persisted into the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> Their narration was entirely oral—it was left to sympathetic folklorists and a few (often condescending) sociological field studies to record this practice in writing. Their transcriptions from the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, mixed with memories passed down over decades but only written down more recently, provide rich snapshots of well-established formulas that articulated a paradoxical version of negative theology for the New South.

G.W. Blevins, a white miner and small farmer in southwest Virginia, had been suffering the ravages of tuberculosis and was down to a “skeleton nightmare” by his late 30s. In later reflection he recalled his wild attempts to display strength through crazed violence, and thought that something had “infest[ed]” his mind. He was conscientiously not attending church. He had begun to go to a solitary praying spot and pray for restoration, but felt that his prayers were not going above his head. Then,

as I went back home back out on the ridge here, left of the Norton Road, why it was an old wagon road, a little snow on the ground, just a little bit, wagon ruts and mud. And something—it didn’t point me out yonder, this place and that place—said, would you get down here, just like something spoke to me, said, would you get on your knees here in this mud and pray...[it] didn’t warn or strike me till I fell on my knees right there in that mud. When I got home I was muddy to my pockets—and yet I wasn’t converted...So I went home and the next morning I got out, tried to get a little bucket of water, and my wife was an invalid, crippled. I went out and I tried to pray and I couldn’t pray at all. Somehow or other my prayer didn’t reach nowhere. [Then] just like something spoke to me, said, would you go and tell your wife, says, that you’ve not lived as true as you promised to when you married. And I said, yes, I’ll do anything.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Folklorists Brett Sutton, Charles Williams, Bruce Grindal, and Beverly Patterson found such narrative testimonies in rural black and white communities in the 1970s and 80s. See Brett Sutton, “Language, Vision, Myth: The Primitive Baptist Experience of Grace,” Charles Williams, “The Conversion Ritual in a Rural Black Baptist Church,” and Bruce Grindal, “The Religious Interpretation of Experience in a Rural Black Community” in Hall and Stack, eds. *Holding on to the Land and the Lord* and Beverly Patterson, “Finding a Home in the Church: Primitive Baptist Women” in Tyson, Peacock, and Patterson, eds. *Diversities of Gifts*. Sutton collected such narratives from black and white Primitive Baptists throughout the Southeast, Williams from black Baptists in Lowndes County, Mississippi, Grindal from ten rural black churches (Primitive Baptist, AME, Baptist, and Holiness/Pentecostal) in the north Florida community of Midway, and Patterson from white Primitive Baptists in the North Carolina mountains. Historian Albert Raboteau and religious scholar Alonzo Johnson found blacks on the South Carolina and Georgia sea islands telling testimonies in the 1980s. See Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones* 193 and Alonzo Johnson and Paul Jersild, “Ain’t Gonna Lay My ‘Ligion Down” 8-31

<sup>12</sup> G.W. Blevins, Archive of Folk Culture AFS 2766A-2767A [1939 recording of an incident c1900]

In the black tenant and sharecropping community of Gee's Bend in the Alabama Black Belt, where FSA workers came in to promote the program of Rural Rehabilitation in the late 30s, a man recounted a brief sketch to a rather skeptical Tuskegee graduate student (who noted that the man "resented his experience being called a dream"): "I started prayin' for religion when I was about twelve years old. One day I was walkin cross a field and found a lot of work to do diggin up stumps. Somebody had cut the trees down by the river, and I had to dig up them stumps too. After I dugged up stumps nearly all day I asked the Lord to let me die and rise again if I was converted. I dies and raised again, and then I knowed I was converted."<sup>13</sup>

In central Tennessee a black farmer, born into slavery, was interrupted as he was building an emblem of freedom in the New South:

I was putting a top on our little log house that I was building. It was broad open day, and I was as wide awake as ever I was in this world. I had just got in position to fit on the first rafters when a voice called my name three distinct times. It called, 'Oh, William! Oh, William! Oh, William!' I hollered and answered, 'Hey!' But nobody answered. I looked all around and began to wonder about the voice. It sounded so strange. It seemed to come from afar off, and still it seemed to be right at me...I started to praying again. That night I went to my regular praying place. I usually prayed behind a big beech tree a little distance from the house, and often during the night, when I would feel to pray, I would get out of bed and go to this tree. That night I said, 'Lord, if I am praying right, let me hear a dove mourn three times.' While I was praying, I went off in a trance, and I saw myself going up a broad, hilly road through the woods. When I was nearly to the top I saw a big dog. I got scared and started to run back, but something urged me on. The dog was chained to a big block, I found out when I got closer, and though she tried to get me, I passed out of her reach. I came then to a tree like a willow, and there I heard a dove mourn three times.<sup>14</sup>

A white coal miner in West Virginia recalled his own harrowing solitary vision:

My brothers, they went in the mines to work. I didn't feel like going out to work that morning. I thought I was natural sick. I said, "I'll stay at home, stay at the house here. You all go to your work." They didn't want to leave me, but they went on to the work. Long about nine o'clock, I laid down across the bed. And being laying there, a man

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<sup>13</sup> Nathaniel Colley, "An Exploratory Study" 12

<sup>14</sup> Clifton Johnson, ed. *God Struck Me Dead* 20-21. The narrative was recorded in the late 1920s, and the incident may be dated to the 1880s or 90s.



appeared over me. He was just as white, as white as snow. And he walked right up over me, astride my legs, and looked right down in my face. And his hair was as white as lamb's wool, flowing out over his shoulders. And he had a white cloth over his head. And his eyes was just flashing like fire. And he was white, he was so white, his garments were so white. And I felt myself getting numb down in my feet, and death crept on up, crept on up. I was just sure I was dying. This man, he kept looking me in the face. And his eyes was revolving, just like fire in his eyes. I couldn't get my eyes away. I wanted to turn my head but I couldn't. I had to look right at him. Death come on up...I didn't know nothing then for a long time. I laid there, I don't know how long. When the Lord brought me to, I was laying on a little bench all the way across the room. And I heard a voice, and it come from somewhere over my shoulder, and it spoke like this: "Arise now and shine..." It was a dark and dreary morning when I went in my room, but when I come out, everything looked new, everything was summertime, and the trees was green all around. The little birds was sitting out in the ends of the twigs of the trees, chirping just like they were offering thanks to God. I ain't never seen a morning so bright...<sup>15</sup>

In these narratives, like that of Mr. Fields, the character was literally alone, away from the safe supports of others and vulnerable to the dangers of solitude.

In other narratives, like Rosie Reed's, the character was surrounded by others, but overcome by a vision only they saw or an ecstasy only they experienced. As he recalled in the late 1930s, Samuel Adams, a white small farmer in eastern Kentucky, was in the field hoeing corn with his family when he was overpowered by a feeling that he was a "vile sinner." He knelt down in the rows of corn, and, he remembered, "everything looked as dark to me as the darkest night I ever seed in my whole life, no light or nothing." But then he saw a light that began to come towards him, got larger and larger, and then "struck" him down. He jumped up, began shouting, and was soon baptized in the north fork of the Kentucky River.<sup>16</sup>

Quincy Higgins, a white small farmer in Allegheny County, North Carolina, also experienced a vision in his cornfield. It was shortly after the death of his mother, and marked a

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<sup>15</sup> Brett Sutton, "In the Good Old Way: Primitive Baptist Traditions" *Southern Exposure* 5:2 (1977):98-99. Sutton's fieldwork was in the mid-70s in southwest Virginia. The exact date of the incidents in this older man's narrative is unclear, but they occurred at some point in his younger days.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Simpson Adams, Archive of Folk Culture AFS 2793B-2794B, Library of Congress

turning point in his life. “Well, I, I hadn’t run just exactly the race, straight path, like I’s commanded,” he began, and then told a mystical story:

...my mother died a shouting. Well, that put something on me, or about me, that I hadn’t had. Well, for forty days, I’s on my knees every day. Begging God to let me see her again...And when that forty days was up, I’s plowing the corn over yonder at the old place...And went on, and about three o’clock they’s a whirlwind appeared somewhere in the firmament. And I went blind. I went deaf. And automatically, the horse stopped. And when I come back to myself, the lines was a laying over on the cultivator. And I’d a stomped my hat in the ground, and I’d stomped the corn down in both rows. And that was my Mamma. I knowed her, Brother. You couldn’t tell me with all the language you could collect, anything that’d take that away. There she was, and I knowed her, reaching down like that, with them hands, didn’t have a wrinkle in them—everything was just as perfect. Looked young and tender and reaching down there. And, and I knowed, I knowed it was her. And that, that thrilled me more than any t’other. Well, I went—I got airborne, you know...<sup>17</sup>

While Higgins’ mother played a central role in his vision, for a woman in Gee’s Bend it was her pastor. She recounted a disturbing vision: “I was called to go across the river of hell on a spider web. I prayed for the Lord to make my feet sturdy. I knowed if I could get cross I was saved. When I got bout halfway cross the river I felt myself fallin. I called the Lord, but I kept on fallin. I knowed He hadn’t come so I kept on praying. Finally when I was pretty sure the Lord had done come, I asked him to show me a true-born deacon if I had been converted. Instead of showing me a true-born deacon I seed our pastor. I was scared, cause I knowed I had to keep on praying cause I didn’t have it. I just stayed right there and prayed harder than ever. Just that time Brother—Pettway ‘peared before me. I runned home then cause I knowed I had the religion.” Her Tuskegee interlocutor asked if this was a dream, but, he noted, “she was quick to state that she had lived these things in the spirit.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Patrick Mullen, *Listening to Old Voices* 184-185. Mullen interviewed Higgins in 1978, and the incident may be dated to the 1920s.

<sup>18</sup> Nathaniel Colley, “Exploratory Study” 11-12

Two decades before this woman's vision, a white farmer in Patrick County, Virginia was rudely interrupted by a similar vision during the course of his regular labor. He fell off his muledrawn wagon and was trapped under a drill:

And, they, they, ain't no use in me tellin' you how fast things like that, they can happen in a second. And I saw hell, if any man's ever saw it, I saw it wide open, and I knew that was my own; I knew that was where I was headed. And I don't know, there's a voice while I was standin; there, it couldn't have been over just a few seconds, and the mules just stopped when the tongue broke, but they, they's scared to death. And, I don't know, when I saw, saw my doom there, where I headed, why I guess I prayed. I don't remember. But anyway, there's a voice spoke just as plain as you all or any of you spoke today and says, "Fear not, my son." And here I am years and years after that a tellin' that whether you believe it or not. But how the drill went off me, I'll never know. Only God'll know.<sup>19</sup>

In the late 20s or early 30s, Zora Neale Hurston recorded black Baptist deacon Ernest Huffman's memory of another similar vision.

They was runnin p'tracted meetin and all my friends was getting religion and joinin the ch; but I never paid it no mind. I was hard. But I don't keer how hard you is, God kin reach you when He gits ready for you. One day, bout noon, it was de 9<sup>th</sup> day of June, 1886, when I was walkin in my sins, wallerin in my sins, dat He tetched me wid de tip of His finger and I fell right where I was and laid there for three long days and nights. I layed there racked in pain under sentence of death for my sins. And I walked over hell on a narrer foot log so I had to put one foot right in front de other...And de hell hounds was barkin on my tracks and jus before dey rushed me into hell and judgment I cried: "Lawd, have mercy," and I crossed over safe. But still I wouldn't believe. Then I saw myself hangin over hell by one strand of hair and de flames of fire leapin up a thousand miles to swaller my soul and I cried: "Jesus, save my soul and I'll believe, I'll believe." Then I found myself on solid ground and a tall white man beckoned for me to come to him and I went, wrapped in my guilt, and he 'nointed me wid de oil of salvation and healed all my wounds. Then I found myself layin on de ground under a scrub oak and I cried: "I believe, I believe."<sup>20</sup>

Sociologist Leonard Doob recorded a similarly terrifying vision of a white tenant in the rich Delta lands of Sunflower County, Mississippi, though what is written appears to be a fragment leaving off before any hopeful deliverance. (Doob also characterized it as a dream, and one which to him symbolized the pathetic lot of "poor whites"):

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<sup>19</sup> Patrick Mullen, "Ritual and Sacred Narratives in the Blue Ridge Mountains" *Papers in Comparative Studies* 2 (1982-1983):26. The 79 year old farmer's vision can be dated to 1918.

<sup>20</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1983):88-89

He was curled up on a bench. He saw...a group of poor whites, all friends or associates of his. They were pointing their fingers at him, but he was unafraid of them. They were trying to tell him something and they could not make him understand. He felt sorry for them. Then he wanted to say that he was sorry, and they would not listen. Instead he laughed at them and they laughed at him. He looked over their heads and suddenly saw a gigantic rock lowering itself upon them. He shouted to them, but they continued to laugh. He shouted again. Their laughter increased. It grew louder and louder as the rock came nearer and nearer. Once more he shouted and cried to them to step aside, let the rock descend, and then break it into pieces. Their laughter increased. It was so great that it turned to tears. He felt tears in his own eyes as he watched them being crushed to death. They were crushed, hopelessly crushed...as the rock lifted itself. But then a wonderful thing happened. Their crushed bodies arose and melted into each other. They formed a bright red line. The line began to move. It moved faster and faster. The tears sprinkled his face. He watched the line. Its redness blinded him. It whirled and whirled. It formed itself into a spiral. It unfolded itself again into a straight line. Once more it grew into a spiral. The spiral whirled and whirled. Soon it was a flaming ball which approached him. He screamed. It burnt him. It dug into him. It was killing him. He screamed more rapidly. He was dead and they were dead. When he opened his eyes, he felt the rays of a sinking sun.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps this white tenant was at a terrifying stage like that of the woman in Gee's Bend who continued falling, or like Adams after he was struck down but before he jumped up. Or perhaps Doob edited the narrative, which he used to conclude his essay, to better express the spirit of his argument that poor whites were a "frustrated class." At any rate, the sense of utter estrangement from others is palpable.

Ecstatic experiences in such narratives were also marked by a basic aloneness. In the late 1940s Vera Hall, a black tenant and later domestic worker in the Black Belt of Sumter County, Alabama, recalled an experience that happened to her some thirty years earlier. At the age of twelve, in church on a Wednesday night, she was overcome by a mysterious sense: "I don't know what happened. It looks like something hit me. They tell me I shouted. I musta did, because my clothes had all come a-loose when I come to myself. They tell me I just fell off the bench, just fell out. When I come to realize, I was standin up, my clothes all loose, and my

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<sup>21</sup> Leonard Doob, Appendix I, "Poor Whites: A Frustrated Class" in John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* 483-484, fieldwork in 1935-36.

mother was there and she was cryin. So they just carried me up there and sit me back down with the rest of them. I joined the church that night...”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, when she was fourteen, June Carter Cash was at a nighttime prayer meeting at her uncle’s house in the Poor Valley of southwest Virginia when, she remembered, at midnight, “my feelings went off like an atomic blast. I shot up like an arrow, crying, singing, and the fire was all around me.”<sup>23</sup>

Both Hall and Cash were surrounded by others at prayer meetings when the ecstasy struck them, but others, like G.W. Blevins and the Tennessee farmer above, had a regular solitary praying spot where they sought the power of God. A preacher told Tom Bronner, a black tenant on the Perthshire Plantation in Bolivar County, Mississippi, to “find ‘a praying ground, go to that praying ground and pray and ask God’ for forgiveness. His preacher instructed him to go to his chosen place daily until the Lord spoke to him. He did that for two weeks, going to the same place ‘under a pecan bush on the bogue bank’ each day. Some sixty years later [late 1980s] Reverend Bronner remembered that he ‘had been there so many times it was clean where I had been praying, begging God to bless my soul.’ In his chosen sacred spot under that pecan bush he found God.”<sup>24</sup> Eddie “Son” House, who labored in the rich Delta cotton fields of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana while also pioneering the musical form of the blues, recalled a similar experience from his youth in the 1910s. House watched his neighbors shouting at a revival, but felt inwardly unmoved.

I wanted mine [religion] to be real and so I just kept on...I prayed and prayed, commenced prayin’, man, every night, workin’ in the field, ‘n’ plowin’ the mule and everything. Work all day hard, ‘n’ tryin’ to pray. And work. So, finally, I kept on like that until they come back home that night, middle of the night after the pastor turned out. So I went on home. And I was livin’ down in the lower part of the place from where my daddy ‘n’ them stayed, down to my cousin’s. Went down there; I didn’t want to be up

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<sup>22</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Rainbow Sign* 46

<sup>23</sup> June Carter Cash, *Among My Klediments* 39

<sup>24</sup> Tom Rankin, “On Praying Ground” in Rankin, *Sacred Space: Photographs from the Mississippi Delta* (Jackson: Mississippi, 1993):19

around the old folks. And, man, I went out back of the house little bit, in this old alfalfa field out there...I went on. I was there in that alfalfa field and I got down. Pray. Getting' on my knees in the alfalfa. Dew was fallin'. And, man, I prayed and I prayed and I prayed and—for wait awhile—man, I hollered out. Found out then. I said, “Yes, it is somethin’ to be got, too, ‘cause I got it now!” Went on back there to that house and told my cousin Robert and all them ‘bout that...<sup>25</sup>

Leonard Bryan, a black small farmer in Allegheny County, North Carolina, was also troubled by the religion that eluded him at a revival meeting. In his own recounting, he had been “wild as a buck,” a drunkard who toted a thirty-two twenty pistol everywhere.

Went to a revival...and I just got to praying and wanted to change. I see I was on the wrong road. Commenced to praying, and used to be woods right out there...And I'd go there at night after I'd come from the church and say, “I'm gonna go out here and pray in the woods out there.” And seemed like the boogerman...get me out there and I couldn't pray. I had to come out of them woods. I'd come out of the woods and come down here in the field. I was afraid, just kinda afraid that the boogerman was trying to get me, and run me out...I'd been a praying for two or three weeks. And I come down here that night and prayed, and went back, come back out—I was sleeping upstairs here, I sleep upstairs—and I just laid there and cried and prayed all night, I couldn't, I couldn't sleep. And I said, “Good Lord, if you'll just let that spirit, that feeling hit me like it's been a hitting me, I'll get up and shout.”

The next time Bryan went to church, he demonstrated the answer to his petition. He began shouting and when he came to after some time, he became aware that “He done it, and that was the Holy Spirit, and I didn't know what it was. I didn't know how to own it.”<sup>26</sup>

Like Tom Bronner, Son House, and Leonard Bryan, an elderly black woman in the Midway community of northern Florida remembered the “time in her adolescence when she went to her praying place near the swamp and, in solitude and eager anticipation, was filled by the spirit of the Lord and ‘got religion.’ In her words, she was ‘struck down and shot through to the bone by the quickening light of the Spirit.’”<sup>27</sup> Similarly, an older white woman in Wilkes County, North Carolina saw a vision as she prayed in a tobacco barn. “And I was prayin,” she

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<sup>25</sup> Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* 19-20. Titon interviewed the elderly House in 1971.

<sup>26</sup> Patrick Mullen, *Listening to Old Voices* 91. Mullen interviewed Bryan in 1978, and the experience may be dated to the 1920s.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Grindal, “The Religious Interpretation of Experience in a Rural Black Community” in Hall and Stack, eds. *Holding on to the Land and the Lord* 93

recalled, “and that barn it was made out of logs and daubed with red dirt. And that barn just disappeared when that light appeared, and that place was just so gold, and seemed like somethin’, a light that bright would hit you in the eyes. Now you know how a car light hurts your eyes; well that hit my body, somethin’ did, and that light it wasn’t, it didn’t hurt my eyes a’tall. It just come right to me, and it come to me just like that there, and it just went all over me, and that, I just, I just felt it.”<sup>28</sup> She stumbled some as she sought words to describe the vision, but then clarified. “When you get reborned again,” she said, “it’ll be somethin’ that this world can’t give you, and they can’t take it away.”<sup>29</sup>

Lloyd Chandler, a small farmer, preacher, and singer in the rugged country of Madison County, North Carolina, had his own praying spot two miles into the forest, underneath a large dogwood tree, and for years he would regularly walk to it and pray to God in the solitude of the woods. But that was Chandler in his adult years—as a young man in the 1910s he was notoriously violent, known to his neighbors as “wild,” “bad,” “crazy,” “drunken,” “scary.”<sup>30</sup> Chandler regularly staged awe-inspiring acts of strength or destruction for others to see. He would stand up straight, slowly bend over from the waist, grab a feed sack weighing some one hundred pounds with his teeth, and then jerk quickly back up clenching the sack in his mouth and lifting it dramatically off the ground. Or he would tie up an old mare and try to milk her, then “open her mouth and stick his head in and dare her to bite him.” One time, his daughter-in-law vividly recalled, Chandler was drunk and “walked up to a big hollow log with a bee’s nest inside of it. He threw his leg over that log and said, ‘Come on out! Let’s see which one of us is the best

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<sup>28</sup> Patrick Mullen, “Ritual and Sacred Narratives in the Blue Ridge Mountains” 25-26. The woman was 74 at the time of Mullen’s 1978 fieldwork, so her vision can be dated to the 1910s or 20s.

<sup>29</sup> Mullen 25

<sup>30</sup> Carl Lindahl, “Thrills and Miracles: Legends of Lloyd Chandler” 136

man.’ He took his hat in his hand and began to hit the log, ‘Come on out,’ he said. The bees began to cover him and sting him, but he crushed them all finally with his bare hands.’<sup>31</sup>

As Chandler himself later narrated it, beginning in the early 1920s and then many times in subsequent decades, he and a friend had gone on a two-week drinking binge of moonshine and whisky. This time there was no display; they were going to drink themselves into the oblivion of death. Exactly what happened is unclear. The friend disappeared and was later found dead. Chandler wound up in the hayloft of an old barn deep in a remote mountain cove. He lay shivering in the loft and passed into a deep sleep. Then, a “profound terror” overcame him. Death began to grab hold of him, and Chandler pleaded for his life. He staggered to his feet in shock, and when he emerged from the barn it was with the unshakable conviction that he had been spared, that “Christ had not turned his back” on him. Chandler took his narrative and the vision that he turned into a song, “Conversation with Death,” and for the next fifty years made them the centerpiece of his preaching in rural churches and on city street corners.<sup>32</sup> In these he sought to imaginatively push people into the terrifying solitude of their own death, to see, as one of his fellow preachers summarized it, “how it would be to meet death and go out of this world without God.”<sup>33</sup>

The foregoing testimonies come throughout the region, from the mountain valleys of southwest Virginia to the blackland prairie of central Texas, with such points as the Florida panhandle, the Alabama Black Belt, and the Mississippi Delta in between. But they share stock features and familiar tropes: a sense of human insufficiency, a very concrete physicality, and a pervasive solitude. The recurrence of these features indicates a vernacular narrative form marked

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<sup>31</sup> Barbara Chandler, “Why I Believe that Lloyd Chandler Wrote ‘Conversation with Death,’ also Known as ‘O Death’” *Journal of Folklore Research* 41:2/3 (May-December 2004):129

<sup>32</sup> I have combined the accounts of Carl Lindahl and Barbara Chandler, *Journal of Folklore Research* 131 and 139

<sup>33</sup> *Journal of Folklore Research* 135



by normative features, features that the young learned from the old through the practice of testimony-telling in rural churches. Of the telling of such “testimonies” or “visions,” folklorist Zora Neale Hurston wrote in 1942: “These visions are traditional. I knew them by heart as did the rest of the congregation, but still it was exciting to see how the converts would handle them. Some of them made up new details. Some of them would forget a part and improvise clumsily or fill up the gap with shouting. The audience knew, but everybody acted as if every word of it was new.”<sup>34</sup>

Metaphors of human insufficiency and receptivity pervade the narratives. Rosie Reed did not know how to pray, and G.W. Blevins, though he knew, felt like he couldn’t pray and that “somehow or other my prayer didn’t reach nowhere.” For others who did pray, their prayers took the form of pleading requests for a sign or action from God. Mr. Fields in the Brazos bottoms asked God for a sign, the man in Gee’s Bend asked God to let him die and rise again, the Tennessee farmer pled with God for the mysterious sign of a dove mourning three times, the woman in Gee’s Bend asked God to show her a true deacon, and Tom Bronner begged God to bless his soul. Quincy Higgins begged God on his knees for forty days, Son House prayed and prayed as hard as he labored in the field, and Leonard Bryan prayed for two or three weeks straight.

More likely, however, a sign or message from God came unbidden, and the person was recipient, not agent. Samuel Adams was doing nothing unusual—hoeing corn with his family—when everything got dark and he was overcome by the sense that he was a “vile sinner.” The woman in Gee’s Bend was unexpectedly “called to go across the river of hell on a spider web.” The Mississippi Delta white tenant was curled up on a bench when he saw a terrible vision of his friends’ and his own death. Before praying for the sign of a dove mourning, the Tennessee

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<sup>34</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991 [1942]):198.

farmer was simply putting a roof on his house when a mysterious voice called his name three times. Likewise, before he began praying, G.W. Blevins was walking down a muddy old wagon road when a voice beckoned him to kneel in the mud and pray. Ernest Huffman was walking and wallowing in his sins when God struck him down. The Patrick County farmer was knocked off his wagon unawares. Lloyd Chandler was seeking not God but his own self-annihilation when, shivering and drunk, the awful specter of Death appeared to him and sent him pleading with Christ to still accept him.

In addition to depicting themselves as recipients of divine action, the narrators also described ecstatic experiences in which they lost self-control and were overpowered by God. Reed felt herself mashed down into the floor and then stood upright again. Quincy Higgins was so overcome in his cornfield that he stomped rows of corn and his hat before he came to. The Patrick County farmer had no idea how he became untrapped from the drill that fell on him. In reflection Vera Hall did not know exactly what had happened to her, except that others told her she fell off the bench and awakened with her clothes loose. June Carter Cash was overcome by ecstasy, shooting up like an arrow and feeling the “the fire” was all around her. Overwhelmed, she wept, as did Mr. Fields, the white Delta tenant, and Vera Hall’s mother.

While the narrators were careful to defend their ecstatic experiences as real and not just dreams, they described such ecstasy as happening in a realm of mystery beyond ordinary comprehension. The West Virginia miner saw a mysterious white man appear before his bed. The Tennessee farmer “went off in a trance,” Samuel Adams saw total darkness in the midst of the workday, the woman in Gee’s Bend went across the river of hell “in the spirit,” Lloyd Chandler spoke directly with Death, and Quincy Higgins touched the hand of his deceased mother. The Wilkes County woman was hit by a bright light that “this world can’t give you,” and

Leonard Bryan “didn’t know how to own” the feeling that overpowered him in church when he began shouting. This sense is reiterated in the metaphors used to characterize the action in these ecstatic experiences: Fields “receive[d]” his religion down in the bottoms, Higgins went “blind” and “deaf,” and G.W. Blevins, Samuel Adams, Vera Hall, Ernest Huffman, Leonard Bryan, the Wilkes County woman, and the woman in Midway were “struck” or “hit.”

But as these images indicate, the narration of experience was marked by a very concrete earthiness—the narrators do not dwell on inward emotional states but rather describe drama with a sense of raw physicality. The natural world or the mundane one of agriculture are notable presences: the riverside “old sheltering rock” where Reed and Zadie pray, Fields down in the river bottoms, Blevins walking on a muddy “old wagon road,” the Wilkes County woman in her tobacco barn, the Gee’s Bend man in a newly cleared riverside field, the Tennessee farmer praying “behind a big beech tree,” Adams and Higgins in the rows of corn, Chandler in the loft of an old barn, Bronner “under a pecan bush on the bogue bank,” and the Midway woman praying in the solitude of the swamp.

This tangibility is reiterated in the prominent role of the human body. Hall fell off the bench, only to reawaken standing with her clothes all loose. Cash “shot up” from a position of prayer and began to cry and sing. Chandler did not just think about his mortality, he felt death’s icy hands begin to grab him, as did the West Virginia miner who felt death slowly creeping up his body. Blevins was “muddy to my pockets” when he returned home after hearing a voice. Reed felt herself being stood back up again, and everything was “bright as sunshine” with “the prettiest people I’d ever seen in all my life,” a vision of restoration echoed by the West Virginia miner who saw everything as summertime and “never a morning so bright.” The woman in Gee’s

Bend felt herself falling towards the river, Ernest Huffman was knocked out and lay still for three days and nights, and the Mississippi tenant felt the horror of a flaming ball burn into him.

That horror was accentuated for the Mississippi tenant because, like the other narrators, he had to find God without the secure supports of others. In addition to metaphors of human insufficiency/ receptivity and concrete, earthy imagery—or, rather, accentuated by them—is a pervasive sense of lonely solitude. In many narratives God comes unexpectedly to the narrator when they are literally alone: Blevins alone and on his way home, Chandler in the loneliness of a remote barn loft after his drinking companion had disappeared, the West Virginia miner on his bed when his brothers had departed for work. Others plead for God in solitude, either through their own initiative or at the behest of others: Fields praying for a sign down in the Brazos bottoms, the Gee's Bend man alone in the new field, Son House in the old alfalfa field, the Wilkes County woman alone in her tobacco barn, the Tennessee farmer away from the house at night at his praying place, Leonard Bryan at his praying place in the woods, the Midway woman in solitude at her praying place near the swamp, and Bronner at his praying spot in accordance with his preacher's admonitions.

If not literally alone, the narrator faced the anxiety of solitude in a vision, trance, or dream. Adams alone saw a terrifying darkness and then a mysterious light, despite his family's proximity in the field. Both Ernest Huffman and the Gee's Bend woman faced the terror of crossing the river of hell alone, the Mississippi tenant felt estranged from his friends even as he cried out to them, and Lloyd Chandler's poetic rendering of his vision evoked the awful solitude of one's own death. Reed's and Hall's narratives display a particularly vivid sense of separation from others. Overcome by an awful feeling, Reed could no longer hear the singing of those around her. Only after being stood back up by divine power was she restored to a sense of

belonging, hugging her uncle and seeing her father try to make his way toward her. Hall was alone in a very earthy sense, perhaps naked with her “clothes all loose.” After reawakening, she saw her mother and was carried to rejoin the congregation.

These recurrent elements—metaphors of passivity and receptivity, raw physicality, and a disturbing solitude—indicate that what the folklorists and sociologists found was a well-developed oral form of religious expression. People who grew up in the Dyess Colony remember stories of visions, but at sixty years’ remove they cannot recount specific testimonies that were told.<sup>35</sup> We cannot know the exact testimonies that a young J.R. Cash heard; the closest in geography to Cash’s Dyess are faith healing narratives that William Clements and his students gathered among Pentecostals in 1972-73 in Poinsett and Craighead counties, just west of Mississippi County, the location of Dyess.<sup>36</sup> The faith healing narratives, though sharing some features with the testimony, are significantly less numerous and seem to have been primarily a Pentecostal phenomenon. But the regularized features of testimonies across both time and space suggest normative conceptions embodied in an oral form that circulated throughout the region (for more on orality, see chapter 7). A strange story that Johnny Cash began to tell publicly in the 1990s suggests his rather intimate acquaintance with this oral form. It is not hard proof that this was a childhood legacy, but the memories of Dyess people and the account’s uncanny similarities to other testimonies weigh in that direction.

Only in the mid-90s, tersely in interviews and then at length in his 1997 autobiography, did Cash tell the story of a decisive event in his life thirty years before, in 1967 in Nickajack Cave in Tennessee. The actuality of the story is in some dispute. Biographer Steve Turner notes that Cash did not include the story in his 1975 “spiritual odyssey” *Man in Black*, and biographer

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<sup>35</sup> Author interviews with A.J. Henson and Calvin and Goldie Dallas, January 9-10, 2006

<sup>36</sup> William Clements, “Faith Healing Narratives from Northeast Arkansas” *Indiana Folklore* 9 (1976)

Michael Streissguth presents mixed evidence, with Cash's longtime bass player and friend Marshall Grant insisting "that did not happen," and his daughter Rosanne arguing, "the cave was significant...the cave in a way really was a turning point."<sup>37</sup> Cash's own 1967 liner notes for the album *From Sea to Shining Sea* refer to a visit to Nickajack Cave as inspiration for the song "The Whirl and the Suck." "The cave is awesome," Cash wrote. "The mouth is about 150 feet wide and 75 feet high. Experts have proven that the cave, with its thousands of side caverns, goes more than 40 miles. It is estimated that 10 million bats fly out every day at dusk. The air is clean and beautiful..."<sup>38</sup> Son John Carter Cash corroborates the actuality of Cash's visit to the cave in his 2007 *Anchored in Love: An Intimate Portrait of June Carter Cash*.<sup>39</sup> At any rate, whatever exactly happened, the story that Cash told in his autobiography is revealing and suggestive.

"I had wasted my life. I had drifted so far away from God and every stabilizing force in my life that I felt there was no hope for me," he wrote of the dark feelings that overwhelmed him in October 1967. He decided to crawl deep into Nickajack Cave, soon to be inundated by the waters of the Tennessee river when the Army Corps of Engineers completed Nickajack Dam later that year. Far back in the cave he would die, and the rising waters would hide his body in oblivion.

I parked my Jeep and started crawling, and I crawled and crawled and crawled until, after two or three hours, the batteries in my flashlight wore out and I lay down to die in total darkness. The absolute lack of light was appropriate, for at that moment I was as far from God as I have ever been. My separation from Him, the deepest and most ravaging of the various kinds of loneliness I'd felt over the years, seemed finally complete. It wasn't. I thought I'd left Him, but He hadn't left me. I felt something very powerful start to happen to me, a sensation of utter peace, clarity, and sobriety. I didn't believe it at first. I couldn't understand it. How, after being awake for so long and driving my body so hard and taking so many pills—dozens of them, scores, even hundreds—could I possibly feel *all right*? The feeling persisted, though, and then my mind started focusing on God...There

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<sup>37</sup> Steve Turner, *The Man Called Cash* 119-120; Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash: The Biography* 137,301-302

<sup>38</sup> Johnny Cash, liner notes to *From Sea to Shining Sea*, Columbia Records, 1968

<sup>39</sup> John Carter Cash, *Anchored in Love: An Intimate Portrait of June Carter Cash* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007):51

in Nickajack Cave I became conscious of a very clear, simple idea: I was not in charge of my destiny. I was not in charge of my own death. I was going to die at God's time, not mine. I hadn't prayed over my decision to seek death in the cave, but that hadn't stopped God from intervening...I started crawling in whatever direction suggested itself, feeling ahead with my hands to guard against plunging over some precipice, just moving slowly and calmly, crablike. I have no idea how long it took, but at a certain point I felt a breath of wind on my back and knew that wherever the breeze was blowing from, that was the way out. I followed it until I began to see light, and finally I saw the opening of the cave. When I walked out, June was there with a basket of food and drink, and my mother. I was confused. I thought she was in California. I was right; she had been. "I knew there was something wrong," she said. "I had to come and find you."<sup>40</sup>

All the regularized features of New South era testimonies are here. Cash was not the agent of his deliverance, but rather a disturbed man bent on suicide; it was God's unbidden and unexpected action that saved him. He was utterly alone, far from any human contact, in the very earthy and concrete setting of the cave when God infused him with a new sense of life. Seeing the light as he found the cave entrance, meeting June Carter with food, and the surprise of his mother's presence all mark a restoration to new life and a return to the embrace of human community. Perhaps what Cash recounted with these regularized features was more or less what he really experienced in October 1967. Or perhaps this was a fictitious story he created to convey a point. But whether fiction or memory, it was not *sui generis*; it was through tropes of an oral form that circulated widely in the religious culture of his youth.

As the above examples have demonstrated, this oral form did cross the color line in the New South. This point is worth emphasizing, because historians Lawrence Levine, Albert Raboteau, Mechal Sobel, and Margaret Creel have interpreted such testimonies as a distinct African-American expression, and one belonging primarily to the slave era.<sup>41</sup> They have uncovered rituals of going into the woods to seek God in late antebellum slave communities, and

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<sup>40</sup> Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 231-232

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* 36-37 and 453n24; Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1978):267, 269-270, 367n110,114; Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* 152-165; Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Westport: Greenwood, 1979):108-130

they have noted that white observers described such rituals as exotic and foreign. However, in fleshing out the narratives that formed a vital part of such rituals, they have relied heavily on accounts in the Fisk University study *God Struck Me Dead*. These were all gathered by Fisk graduate student Andrew Watson in 1927-29 for his thesis on “primitive religion.”<sup>42</sup> These narratives (I have included one above) share similar features with the others of New South origin. Perhaps generalized ideas, perhaps even the stock features, emerged among slave communities in the late antebellum era. As it is, however, all of the existing narratives in regularized oral form come from the New South era, or from older people who came of age in the New South—they are not clearly rooted in the slave era.<sup>43</sup> Cash’s own testimony at fifty years’ remove from the farm does fit with other independent evidence from the time of his youth; those of the elderly blacks interviewed at sixty-five years’ remove from slavery are projected by historians back into the slave past with minimal corroborating evidence.

But if the normative narrative form is a New South development, speaking to New South realities, examinations of late antebellum slave culture do demonstrate that a basic aspect of the testimony ritual—going into the wilderness to meet God—is of African and not European background. In her study of the Gullahs of the Sea Islands, Creel found Gullah conversion ritual to be an “Africanized” interpretation of the conversion that white evangelicals called for, with the west African practice of going into “the bush” as a novice transformed into going into the swamp or forest as prelude to acceptance into the “socio-religious community.”<sup>44</sup> This practice

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<sup>42</sup> Clifton Johnson, ed. *God Struck Me Dead* xix

<sup>43</sup> This parallels Howard Odum and Guy Johnson’s 1926 argument for the New South origins of many “spirituals.” Noting “an impression abroad to the effect that the making of Negro spirituals stopped long ago,” they argued that “on the contrary, it is quite probable that more spirituals are being made today than during the days of slavery.” Odum and Johnson, *Negro Workaday Songs* (New York: New Universities, 1969 [1926]):188

<sup>44</sup> Margaret Creel, “A Peculiar People”: *Slave Religion and Community-Culture among the Gullahs* (New York: New York University, 1988):285-295 and 398n24. See also the racially exclusive interpretation of Alonzo Johnson, “‘Pray’s House Spirit’: The Institutional Structure and Spiritual Core of an African American Folk Tradition” in



was not just to escape white supervision, as Levine implies, but expressed a distinct religious conviction.<sup>45</sup> If in the original African ritual the young must spend a period of time in solitude in a “liminal” space—forest, cave, the bush—before rejoining the community to be acknowledged as a full member, so in slave adaptation of Christianity a period of self-denial in the solitude of woods, swamp, or some other liminal place was necessary prelude to joining the praise house.<sup>46</sup> Exactly how or when this Africanized understanding of conversion spread, so that the white man in Gorgas, Alabama could recall going to the woods and returning shouting as routine at his Methodist church in the 1880s, how Lloyd Chandler might impress listeners with his account of a transformative, visionary experience in a barn loft in a secluded hollow, is not clear. Furthermore, complicating the issue, with the exception of the tenant in Sunflower County, Mississippi (70% black in 1930), all of the white narratives here come from areas with very small black populations (anywhere from 1% to 10% in the period 1890 to 1940). The process of cultural transmission remains elusive, but at some point in the nineteenth century African traditions had spread even to “lily white” areas, shaping an understanding of conversion tied to solitary seclusion and liminal places.

In the New South narratives, however, the solitary, liminal place of African tradition has been transformed from a waiting station preceding communal acceptance into the very location where on the margins of mundane experience—whether literal or on the borderlands of consciousness in visions and ecstasy—one meets God and “gets religion.” It is precisely in the nakedness of solitude, when the supports that secure life have become absent, that God becomes

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Johnson and Jersild, eds. “*Ain’t Gonna Lay My ‘Ligion Down:*” *African American Religion in the South* and also “Introduction” 4

<sup>45</sup> Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* 41-42. Incidentally, the descriptions of secluded praying spots in the woods all come from the mid- to late 1930s. See 454n42-44

<sup>46</sup> Anthropologist Victor Turner finds this practice in rural areas of modern Africa. See Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1974):196ff Anthropologists and others may note practices like these in a wide variety of “traditional” communities, but my question here is how it entered into the U.S. South.

manifest. This is a vernacular Protestant version of apophatic theology or the *via negativa*—a minority impulse in both Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy that describes God through indirect negations of ordinary language and prescribes the lonely experience of deprivation as the path to God.<sup>47</sup>

The likely time of the origin of such narratives, and certainly the era of their wide perpetuation, are clues to the development and meaning of this Protestant *via negativa* in the society and culture of the New South. At the most transparent level, they gave religious articulation to unenviable phenomena of modern life—the alienation and estrangement that the rural poor bore the brunt of as they experienced life on the economic and cultural margins of regional and national life. The central characters in these narratives were typically solitary and often literally away from the established patterns of sociability, and the places where they encountered God were remote and wild or in the frightening space of individual inwardness. Introducing the narratives of *God Struck Me Dead*, Fisk anthropologist Paul Radin argued that they represented “a new individuation.”<sup>48</sup> That new individuation and its evocation of modern phenomena indicate that the rural poor of the region were doing more than just practicing the “old time religion” unchanged.

Many observers over time have heard similar themes of modern alienation and estrangement in the musical forms created by the rural poor of the South in this same era. In 1959 folklorist Alan Lomax argued in his study of early twentieth century black folk religion that “the Negroes were the first group to experience the feelings of rejection, isolation, degradation, and fear that have now become familiar to us all.” “What art,” he asked, “expresses more

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<sup>47</sup> The *via negativa* was articulated by theologians like the 4<sup>th</sup> century Syrian John Chrysostom, in the medieval English *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish priest St John of the Cross in *Dark Night of the Soul*.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Radin, “Status, Fantasy, and the Christian Dogma” in Johnson, ed. *God Struck Me Dead* vii

poignantly mankind's feeling of loneliness and helplessness in the face of a vast and merciless universe than 'Nobody Knows the Trouble I See,' 'Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,' or 'Blind Man Stood on the Way and Cried'?<sup>49</sup> That same year music scholar Samuel Charters described the "harsh desolate sense of loneliness" in the early [1920s and 30s] country blues, and contrasted the lonely cries of the blues to the repetitive and communal work chants of an earlier era.<sup>50</sup> Lawrence Levine argued that the blues that emerged in the early twentieth century represented "new forms of self-conception" in black folk thought, and that the blues was "the most highly personalized, indeed, the first almost completely personalized music that Afro-Americans developed."<sup>51</sup> Of country music's seminal Carter Family, biographers Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg have recently argued that they displayed an acute talent for "giving voice" to the "unspoken dread" in modern life—the fear that one single life, especially the life of those whom the New South's dominant culture defined as worthless "trash," might not ultimately matter. "What the Carters cut down in those early recordings [in the late 1920s]," they write, "was the sound of a single person facing down the desolate emptiness of uncaring time, a distant, ghostly cry from the darkest hollows: *Don't forget me. I mattered.*"<sup>52</sup> Music critic Greil Marcus has argued that the Carters' contemporary Dock Boggs and, later, Hank Williams both evoked a musical persona that was distinctly "modernist." In the music of both was "a solitary individual who can no longer fall back on the comforts and assurances of an unquestioned religion; an immutable family; a stable, rural society; or a predictable economy."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Rainbow Sign* 7,15

<sup>50</sup> Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Rinehart, 1959):157

<sup>51</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* 221

<sup>52</sup> Mark Zwonitzer with Charles Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone? The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002):102

<sup>53</sup> Greil Marcus, "Dock Boggs" in Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, *The Encyclopedia of Country Music* 42-43

The rural poor of the New South did not enjoy the solace of a predictable economy or a stable, rural society, and such forces wrought considerable damage on families (chapter 3). Nor, strangely, was their religion an easy solace either. The genuine convert, as pictured in these narratives, could not rely on any other person for support, and the Protestant *via negativa* pushed that lonely individual to feelings of insufficiency in a naked encounter with God. In separating the initiate from the human networks—particularly family and kin—that typically fortify life against danger, rural Protestants of the New South were actually returning to and breathing new life into an impulse in 18<sup>th</sup> century evangelicalism. When they first began to appear in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century colonies, evangelicals were a social threat in that they sought to tear people away from familiar networks through a message accentuating individual conversion and separate communities of the faithful. The “morbid” inwardness and “self-alienation” that evangelicals demanded was disturbing to many—including some anxious souls within the fold, who doubted their acceptance by God and tried to kill themselves.<sup>54</sup>

In the course of the nineteenth century evangelicals throughout the United States found ways to tone down the dangers of morbidity and self-alienation. In the North and Midwest unrestrained emotions that continued to break out in revivals into the early 1830s gave way to a “rhetoric of evangelical domesticity” in which the ordered, sympathetic family became the model for religious life.<sup>55</sup> The “businessman’s revival” of 1857-58 linked such ordered domesticity to an emergent capitalism, and in the 1870s the emotion-inducing preaching of Dwight Moody and the sentimental music of Ira Sankey fortified the fusion of a “safe”

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<sup>54</sup> Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* 28-33, 38

<sup>55</sup> Sandra Sizer, *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion* 111

domesticated evangelicalism with the optimistic ethos of capitalist expansion.<sup>56</sup> In the South evangelicalism was transformed from a “radical” alternative challenging gentry lifestyle into, by the 1830s, a planter-dominated code that summoned white men to fulfill their duties to their social dependents. In the postbellum era, with the rise of the capitalist New South, evangelical domesticity with its ordered feeling and bourgeois moral code spread quickly, with white Methodist preacher Sam Jones being hailed in the 1880s as “the Moody of the South,” and white companies and black denominational presses publishing millions of new “gospel songs” in the sentimental style of Sankey.<sup>57</sup> White urban Protestants in the New South came to identify Protestantism and the dominant social order so closely that the society took on a sacred aura, and black urban Protestants developed their churches as spaces of black autonomy and racial solidarity and respectability (see historiography in chapter 2).

In their own Protestant churches, the rural poor of the New South reawakened the early evangelical sense of lonely individuals before God, and through transformation of the African ritual of going into the bush, accentuated the idea that God was to be encountered away from the ordinary mechanisms of society. Their Protestantism actually fostered the individuation that Radin noted; it was a cultural move and more than just a mirror of social life. While there were forces that could break down family life, rural people typically went to church with other family members and on Sundays enjoyed the sociability of their neighbors. The religious message they promoted, however, sought to imaginatively distance them from such networks and seek God as lonely individuals. It is quite possible that the lonely characters of early blues and country were inspired by this rural religious culture, not, as Levine argues, by the optimistic individualism in

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<sup>56</sup> Kathryn Long, *The Revival of 1857-58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening* (New York: Oxford University, 1998); Don Cusic, *The Sound of Light: A History of Gospel Music* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1990)

<sup>57</sup> Kathleen Minnix, *Laughter in the Amen Corner*; Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South* 97-102, 127-132

regional and national culture, as epitomized in the Horatio Alger character.<sup>58</sup> Roosevelt Fields recalled the paradox at work in rural religion: “We used to sing a song that Mother—I can’t sing the song exactly how it goes, but if Mother would help you cross that river, she would do it, but she could only cross the river for herself, you know.”<sup>59</sup> Fields was remembering a folksong that Carl Sandburg had recorded in Texas in the 20s:

You got to cross that River Jordan  
You got to cross it for yourself  
O there ain’t nobody cross it for you  
You got to cross it for yourself  
Can’t your brother cross it for you  
You got to cross it for yourself...<sup>60</sup>

This song was a variant or adaptation of an older song, “Lonesome Valley,” which George Jackson traced back to early evangelical days:

Everybody’s got to walk that lonesome valley  
We’ve got to walk it by ourselves  
Ain’t nobody here can walk it for us  
We’ve got to walk it by ourselves  
All sinners got to walk that lonesome valley  
They’ve got to walk it by theirselves...

The rural poor continued to sing this song in their churches, and it was a staple in the Dyess Colony.<sup>61</sup> The song reiterated the sensibility of the conversion narratives. In his close study of white and black urban Baptists in the New South, Paul Harvey finds that by contrast, “rural song styles came to be thought of as backward,” and surely some of that sense of backwardness had less to do with sound and more to do with the fact that the melancholy, “morbid” tone of these old songs did not resonate with the emergent self-conception of New South townspeople.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* 222-223

<sup>59</sup> Roosevelt Fields, interviewed 5/14/99, Baylor Institute for Oral History

<sup>60</sup> Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co, 1927):486

<sup>61</sup> Author interviews with A.J. Henson and J.E. Huff, January 9-10, 2006

<sup>62</sup> Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South* 97. Likewise, George Jackson found in his survey of white Methodist denominational hymnals that by the turn of the century, many of the dark old songs were being cut out, that “the

In “Lonesome Valley” or its variant, the Christian was pictured as walking the valley or crossing the river alone, bearing the burden of individuation. “Wayfaring Stranger,” another old song that emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelicalism and remained current in rural churches of the New South depicted this life as a doleful journey, with the sociability of community a future hope:

I’m just a poor, wayfaring stranger  
Traveling through this world of woe  
There is no sickness, no toil nor danger  
In that bright land to which I go...  
I know dark clouds will hover o’er me  
I know my way is hard and steep  
But beauteous fields arise before me  
Where God’s redeemed their vigils keep

Folklorists found “Lonesome Valley” and “Wayfaring Stranger” being actively sung by rural people throughout the region.<sup>63</sup> Neither song appears in the primary denominational hymnals of white and black Protestants.<sup>64</sup> Tracing the exact scope of these songs, or of the formulaic conversion narratives whose spirit they shared, is impossible: both were oral forms that may have possessed remarkable power for those who heard or spoke them, but are lost to the historian unless some observer was there to write or record their oral performance. The folklorists who have traced narrative conversion accounts into the 1970s and 80s have demonstrated that once established, the oral formulas of the narratives could show remarkable staying power. And surely

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atmosphere was becoming lighter in Methodist circles.” Jackson, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1933):308.

<sup>63</sup> For a sample, see *Checklist of Recorded Songs in the English Language in the Archive of American Folk Song Volume 2* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1942):238,433; Robert Halli, ed. *An Alabama Songbook: Ballads, Folksongs, and Spirituals* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2004):215; Mary Allen Grissom, *The Negro Sings a New Heaven* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1930):2; Zwonitzer with Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone*; John Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Our Singing Country* (New York: Macmillan, 1941):37. This sample shows that “Wayfaring Stranger” was heard in Texas, Tennessee, and Virginia. “Lonesome Valley” was heard in Florida, Kentucky, Texas, and Alabama.

<sup>64</sup> I surveyed the Southern Baptist Convention’s 1926 hymnal, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South’s 1905 and 1930 hymnals, and the National Baptist Convention’s 1921 hymnal.

the wide popularity of Hank Williams' 1947 country gospel hit "I Saw the Light" was due to its musical distillation of familiar tropes in rural Protestant narratives:

I wandered so aimless, life filled with sin  
I wouldn't let my dear Savior in  
Then Jesus came like a stranger in the night  
Praise the Lord, I saw the light...  
Just like a blind man I wandered along  
Worries and fears I claimed for my own  
Then like the blind man that God gave back his sight  
Praise the Lord, I saw the light<sup>65</sup>

In their fusion of African initiation rituals and early evangelical individual inwardness, transforming the former into a *via negativa* of encountering God in a liminal space and accentuating the latter's sense of insecurity and loneliness, the rural poor of the New South fashioned a distinct understanding of conversion, or initiation into personal appropriation of religion. Though he was writing about white Protestants, Samuel Hill's influential analysis of conversion evokes the spirit of the ritual as practiced and preached by the bourgeois voices of both races in the New South era: "man is defined as moral: one who by (Adam's) choice is alienated, can decide, must decide, and is capable of considerable spiritual attainment."<sup>66</sup> The initiate who was supposed to make a "decision for Christ"—a phrase originated by urban Southern Baptists of the New South, crystallized in the "decision cards" they used in evangelization as early as 1907, and popularized by Billy Graham in the post-World War II era—was a voluntary moral agent who freely chose to join the Christian community and adopt an evangelical code of behavior.<sup>67</sup> In the context of the New South, Hill went on to argue, this understanding of conversion served a powerful social purpose in that it purged white southerners

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<sup>65</sup> *The Complete Hank Williams* Mercury Nashville, 1998

<sup>66</sup> Samuel Hill, "The South's Two Cultures" in Hill et al, *Religion and the Solid South* 34

<sup>67</sup> On decision cards and the idea of "decision for Christ," see *Our Home Field* 1907; on Graham's perpetuation of this idea, William Martin, "Billy Graham" in David Harrell, ed. *Varieties of Southern Evangelicalism* 77,79-80



from feelings of guilt and imbued them with a sense of individual power and even triumph.<sup>68</sup> With the notion of “soul winning,” white Baptist and Presbyterian evangelists went out with a triumphal spirit into the countryside and sought to convert the uninitiated into “Christian civilization.”<sup>69</sup> Ted Ownby has noted that small town white newspapers regularly published convert statistics from revival meetings, and argues that revivals were a regularized way to reaffirm the “deepest, often unexpressed values” of evangelicalism, particularly “self-control” and “well-ordered propriety.”<sup>70</sup> Urban black Protestants preached these same ideals with a different social goal. Their embodiment of upright self-control sought to claim a rightful place in a social order that tried to deny it. In the process, however, the black bourgeoisie consciously distanced themselves culturally from the “folk,” who seemed to be concrete demonstrations of some of the very behaviors the dominant white culture deemed retrograde—open displays of emotion and ecstatic loss of self-control.<sup>71</sup> And, in both rural South and parts of Africa, they undertook missionary campaigns to “uplift” the backward members of the race and reform their piety.<sup>72</sup>

The wide scope of the testimonies and their regularized features demonstrate that rural Protestants did maintain their own sense of initiation despite bourgeois campaigns of soul-

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<sup>68</sup> Hill, “South’s Two Cultures” 41-42, see also Ernest Kurtz, “The Tragedy of Southern Religion” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 66 (summer 1982):225

<sup>69</sup> As far as I can trace, British minister Charles Spurgeon coined this phrase. Edward Guerrant, a Presbyterian evangelist in the Kentucky mountains, formed the Society of Soul Winners in 1897, and Lee Scarborough, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and SBC leader, published works like 1922’s *The Tears of Jesus: Sermons to Aid Soul-Winners*. See Wayne Flynt, “Feeding the Hungry and Ministering to the Broken-Hearted: The Presbyterian Church in the US and the Social Gospel 1900-1920” in Charles Wilson, ed. *Religion in the South* 94 and James Thompson, “*Tried as by Fire*” 68

<sup>70</sup> Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan* 153-155

<sup>71</sup> Peter Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* 44,63-77; Edward Wheeler, *Uplifting the Race: The Black Minister in the New South 1865-1902* (Lanham: University Press, 1986); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* 247-250; Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; William Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree* 257-262, 292-305; James Campbell, *Songs of Zion* 55-60

<sup>72</sup> James Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* 108-112; James Campbell, *Songs of Zion*; Albert Raboteau, *Canaan Land* 65-79; Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long* 451-476 excerpted in Larry Murphy, ed. *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*

winning and uplift. Their testimonies imagined not a self-controlled, moral agent who needed to make a decision, but rather a lonely, insufficient individual who sought God away from human community—even as, paradoxically, such testimonies were both taught and learned in a communal setting, with group sanction. The individual of the testimonies was not moral but rather, in Marcus' phrase, "modernist," or like Soren Kierkegaard's idealized solitary believer, "out on 70,000 fathoms of water:" shorn of the various ties that secure one's place in the world, pleading for a deliverance that only God could give.<sup>73</sup>

This cultural practice freed religion—the religion one was supposed to get in liminality—from easy identification with any element of the social order. A lengthy and long-established body of scholarship has demonstrated that Protestantism in the South can and has merged rather easily with such things as the defense of slavery, the Confederacy, the Lost Cause, segregation, the Religious Right, racial uplift, and Civil Rights. It has proven rather easily amenable to very different social causes, such that the white Methodist periodical *Christian Advocate* could laud the relics associated with the recently-deceased Jefferson Davis as sacred as "Christians hold the wood of the Cross" in 1889, even as black Methodist bishop Henry McNeal Turner could argue in the denominational periodical *Voice of Missions* a decade later that "God is a Negro."<sup>74</sup>

These statements may be extreme (though Charles Wilson argues that Lost Cause veneration of the Confederacy created a "civil religion" for the New South up to World War I, and scholars like Gayraud Wilmore, C. Eric Lincoln, and Albert Raboteau laud Turner as a "race" man who articulated the spirit of "the black church").<sup>75</sup> Still, as chapter 3 argued, notions

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<sup>73</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* ed Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992):204

<sup>74</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1980):45; Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* 152

<sup>75</sup> Wilson, *Baptized in Blood* 1,161; Wilmore 149-157; C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York: Schocken, 1974):108; Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones* 37-56

of security in landownership and the necessary immorality of the transient were the result of a distinct New South culture, one indebted to its Protestant faith—and one that culturally denied the rural poor a place as proper members. In this context, imagining a *via negativa* and a liminal God created psychological space for rural Protestants to find their own sense of belonging, one that did not depend on property-owning, an idealized stable home, and a moral code of respectability. Anthropologist Victor Turner writes that “the process and state of liminality represents at once a negation of many, though not all, of the features of preliminal social structure and an affirmation of another order of things and relations.”<sup>76</sup> In that other order of relations, rural Protestants found their own sense of belonging. In the words of the Wilkes County woman, that sense was “somethin’ that this world can’t give you, and they can’t take it away.” The price of this freeing sense was high, though: rural Protestants bore the burden of a heightened individuation, and no one else, neither family nor church, could get religion for the lonely individual. All poor, wayfaring strangers had to walk the lonesome valley for themselves.

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<sup>76</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 196

## CHAPTER 6

### MYSTERY AND LIMIT

1940, Bacon County, Georgia—Annie Bookatee, an elderly black woman who worked as a domestic servant now that her days as a tenant in the field were past, carried the recently consumed possum’s eyes in a small dish, motioning her grandchildren and a five-year-old Harry Crews into the yard with her. It was a strange object lesson that left a vivid imprint on Crews. “‘Possums eat whatall’s dead,’ she said. Her old, cracked voice had gone suddenly deep and husky. ‘You gone die too, boy,’” she said to Crews. “ ‘Yes,’ I said, stunned...I could not now speak. I watched as she carefully took the two little clouded eyes out of the dish and placed them in the hole, arranging them so they were looking straight up toward the cloudless summer sky....Auntie smiled, showing her snuff-colored gums. ‘You ain’t got to think on it, boy. See, we done put them eyes looking up. But you gone be down. Ain’t never gone git you. Possum be looking for you up, an you gone be six big feets under the ground.’” Many years later, recounting this incident and reflecting on its meaning, Crews wrote, “Auntie made me believe we live in a discoverable world, but that most of what we discover is an unfathomable mystery that we can name—even defend against—but never understand.”<sup>1</sup>

Many miles away, contemporaneous with Annie Bookatee’s ritual act in Bacon County, Mollie Carter was enacting her own sense of limit and mystery in the small farming tobacco lands of Poor Valley, Virginia. Mother to eight children, including A.P. of the Carter Family and Ezra, June Carter Cash’s father, Mollie suffered the loss of her thirteen year old daughter Ettaleen. One day the girl died suddenly from what may have been appendicitis. For thirty years

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Crews, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* 64

after Ettaleen's death in 1914, until her own death in the mid-40s, Mollie regularly climbed a hill in the valley to the Mount Vernon church cemetery. She would plant flowers on her daughter's grave, "go up there and dig around and make it nice...just spend time up there," a descendant recalls. As Carter Family biographer Mark Zwonitzer points out, "Mollie Carter *remembered*, for thirty years, when it would have been easier to forget."<sup>2</sup> Mollie's was surely a painful act of remembering, but, as Zwonitzer argues, her personal *memento mori* was not fatalistic. Rather, it was a way of fighting the temptation to give in to "the desolate, empty feeling that her daughter's short life, and the lives of all those who'd died in her valley, didn't finally matter."<sup>3</sup>

Such gestures—actions that symbolically convey and enact meaning—are not easy to recover. We know of the actions of Annie Bookatee and Mollie Carter only through written accounts from a significantly later date. They did leave powerful impressions on those who witnessed them, though, as both Crews and Mollie Carter's descendants and neighbors testify. Those impressions were bound up with and communicated a certain sense of the world, one imagining a deep awareness of mystery and human limitation.

Two rural Protestant emblems for which there is ample written evidence, however—the figure of the "called" preacher and a body of songs about death—allow the historian to more deeply explore this sense of mystery and limitation, its pointed theological meaning, and its place in the culture of the New South. This chapter analyzes these emblems, the called preacher and the songs of death, and in the process demonstrates that, even in the face of bourgeois critique, rural Protestants articulated their own vision of life. As with their sense of ominous evil and perpetual struggle (chapter 4), their expression of mystery and limit both drew on an older tradition and gave voice to contemporary phenomena in their lives. They rejected both the

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Zwonitzer with Charles Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone? The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music* 102

<sup>3</sup> Zwonitzer with Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me* 102

emergent ideal of professionalization and the management of death through sentimentalization, instead accentuating the stark limit of human knowledge and power, on the other side of which was the elusive mystery of God.

Even reformers who leveled serious criticisms candidly recognized the unrivalled cultural position of the rural preacher. With a progressive sense of surprise, Carter Woodson found in his 1930 study *The Rural Negro* that “in the rural communities the pastor is *still* [my italics] the outstanding man in the group.”<sup>4</sup> Harry Richardson corroborated this in his 1947 study *Dark Glory: A Picture of the Church Among Negroes in the Rural South*. Though by quantitative standards “preachers...cannot be regarded as the group exercising widest influence in rural communities,” in fact they did: “over and against these conclusions is the invariable testimony of persons who work in rural areas...to the effect that the rural pastor *is* influential in the community, so much so that his good will and cooperation must first be obtained if a program in the community is to succeed. For example, one county agent, in speaking of the minister in a community in which he, the county agent, was trying to set up a program, said, ‘That man can do more on one Sunday to tear down my program than I can build up in thirty days.’”<sup>5</sup> In 1939 the Home Missions Council of North America argued for the need to educate and regulate white rural preachers. “One of the great needs in the sharecropper field is that of giving help to the uneducated ministers who roam around, preaching to these people. They...exert a powerful influence among the depressed sharecropper people.”<sup>6</sup> Recalling his early life in the Kentucky mountains in the 20s and 30s, Jim Garland struggled for contemporary [1970s] analogies to capture the “popularity” of the rural preachers who “drew big crowds.” They were “something

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<sup>4</sup> Carter Woodson, *The Rural Negro* 149

<sup>5</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 173

<sup>6</sup> Home Missions Council winter 1939 report, STFU Papers

like the whiz-kids of later years and the movie stars of today.”<sup>7</sup> Rural children’s play also paid tribute to the prestige of the preacher. As a five year old in 1940, Harry Crews imitated the rural preachers for a long time before a captive audience. “I was exhausted by the time it was over,” he recalled, “and I was asleep the moment my head touched the pillow.”<sup>8</sup> A generation earlier, Vera Hall recalled “playing church” as a regular children’s game. “We’d sit under our house and one child would get up and act just like a sho-nuff preacher. I’d sing...Still today [late 1940s] I see little chilluns playin thataway, just like I did when I was a baby.”<sup>9</sup>

Yet the status of the rural preacher was not marked by tangible differences from others, and this was a puzzle to outside observers. What they saw were men whose external lives differed from their hearers in no apparent way. “The ministers are farmers just like everyone else,” Nathaniel Colley found in the black tenant community of Gee’s Bend, Alabama in the late 30s.<sup>10</sup> Ralph Felton used a rural black preacher he interviewed in a middle Georgia county in the late 40s as emblematic of the profession: “the pastor is approximately forty-four years of age, has a fourth grade training, is married and has six children. He is farming as a share-cropper on an 85-acre farm just two miles from the church. He has three other churches with a combined membership of about 500...The minister gets no money at the regular services but he is allowed three rallies per year. These rallies combined, amount to approximately \$300 per year.”<sup>11</sup> Reflecting on his thirty years of work in the North Carolina mountains, white Presbyterian home missionary R.P. Smith wrote in 1930: “many jokes have passed from mouth to mouth at the expense of ‘backwoods’ preachers of the mountains...Being illiterate themselves and serving illiterate congregations, they were not able to pen and keep records of their labors...These men

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<sup>7</sup> Julia Ardery, ed. *Welcome the Traveler Home* 29-30

<sup>8</sup> Harry Crews, *A Childhood* 65

<sup>9</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Rainbow Sign* 44

<sup>10</sup> Nathaniel Colley, “Exploratory Study” 13

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Felton, *These My Brethren* 56-57

worked on their little, rugged, sloping farms six days of the week, and then preached on Sunday, often serving two or three congregations the same day...When a preacher did not own a horse or a mule, and could not borrow one, he went afoot, often walking eight to twelve miles during the day. In most cases no definite salary was promised and but little ever given.”<sup>12</sup> White Baptist leader Victor Masters recorded a similar emblematic example in his 1916 study *The Country Church in the South*. Of a preacher he met in southwest Virginia, he wrote: “the young man preached to two churches for a year, giving three weeks to revival meetings, for a total salary of \$13.20. With his little family he lived in a two-roomed cottage on thirty acres of land for which he was trying to pay. He worked for a neighboring farmer part of the time, in exchange for a horse with which to plow his own small field of corn, and on Sundays walked to his churches, six and fifteen miles away.”<sup>13</sup> Merle Travis, who grew up in the coal country of western Kentucky’s Muhlenberg County in the 1920s and early 30s, remembered typical preachers of his youth in his 1963 song “Preacher Lane.” “Preacher Lane was just a miner in a West Virginia town/ and he daily faced the danger of his labors underground/ but on Sunday at the meeting all the miners’ family came/ just to hear the gospel message preached by Preacher Lane/...many times an injured miner filled with fright and wracked with pain/ in the midst of all his misery he would call for Preacher Lane/ who would humbly kneel beside him and the Lord would hear his prayer/ then great peace would fall upon the injured miner there.”<sup>14</sup>

It was precisely these mundane trappings, these visible and measurable traits that indicated no qualitative distinction, that formed the basis of a sustained and passionate bourgeois critique. Church reformers, sociologists, and others waged a durable rhetorical campaign against

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<sup>12</sup> R.P. Smith, *Experiences in Mountain Mission Work* 90

<sup>13</sup> Victor Masters, *The Country Church in the South* 98

<sup>14</sup> Merle Travis, “Preacher Lane” (recorded March 1963) on Merle Travis, *Folksongs of the Hills/Back Home/ Songs of the Coal Mines* Bear, 1993



the figure of the rural preacher, and their fulminations are valuable evidence in reconstructing the strange figure of the rural preacher. As with the bourgeois critique of rural “emotionalism” (chapter 4), this rhetoric needs to be read critically if it is to open up a strange and unfamiliar context.

“Who, then, is this high priest in the rural community?” Carter Woodson asked with condescension in his 1930 study. “He is not the man required to direct the religious work of an urban center, but ‘an inspired man’ whom the fates have superimposed. He had a vision and he heard a voice which called him to preach. He had ‘to answer this divine call lest God might strike him dead.’ Such an inspired creature may have the rudiments of education or he may be illiterate; for in spite of his lack of mental development he can find a following sufficient to maintain a church...For the special task in which they are engaged their formal preparation is practically blank. They do well to be able to read and write intelligibly.”<sup>15</sup> Five years earlier in his own critical study, *The Country Preacher*, white Baptist seminary professor Jeff Ray repeated a common satirical aphorism about the rural preacher: “he does enough farming to spoil his preaching and enough preaching to spoil his farming.”<sup>16</sup> A decade before, a white Hawkinsville, Georgia doctor sniffed in the Baptist periodical *Our Home Field*, “an unlettered plowman of forty has a dream and thinks he hears a voice, and we ordain him, spoiling a good plowman to make an incompetent exhorter.”<sup>17</sup>

The rural preacher’s lack of formal training was a recurrent source of critique. How, bourgeois critics asked, could such men be leaders when they had no more education than their hearers? From Thomas County, Georgia, educated black minister W.H. Holloway wrote that “the majority of the ministers are unlearned or ignorant men, ignorant in the sense of fitness for

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<sup>15</sup> Carter Woodson, *Rural Negro* 156-157

<sup>16</sup> Jeff Ray, *The Country Preacher* 14

<sup>17</sup> *Our Home Field* 9/12

leadership.” Furthermore, in the matter of morality, “his home life as a general rule is on no higher level than that of his neighbor.”<sup>18</sup> In an address to black professors in 1909, Jesse Moorland disputed the rural idea of the “calling” of uneducated men. “God never calls a man to preach unless He also provides a way for him to make due preparation for that service.” Those who claimed a call but pursued no education were unfit, and the situation was serious: “eighty per cent of our people are not in the great centers but are scattered throughout the length and breadth of the land in small hamlets and the country districts. These people are too often as sheep without a shepherd. No doubt many of the shepherds are doing the best they can. Give them credit for all they do, but the demand is such that a more efficient ministry must enter every hamlet, and there lift and inspire the people.”<sup>19</sup> “The establishment of churches by a relatively illiterate mass has been unrestrained,” Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson lamented in their 1933 study *The Negro’s Church*. “In the majority of Negro churches there has been no standard allowing men to enter the ministry. If a man says he is called to preach, he can usually be ordained.”<sup>20</sup> In his 1947 study *Dark Glory*, Harry Richardson described a scene that remained emblematic. “The untrained rural preacher often makes the first half of his message a reading of some sermon that he has copied verbatim from a book, no matter how old or inapplicable the sermon may be. This part he calls, with a lack of humor, the ‘intellectual part.’ Since reading for these men is a difficult undertaking and therefore is ineffective, they try in the latter half of the message to make up for the poor first part by offering a heated hodge-podge of emotional shibboleths mixed with bits of common sense.” Richardson did find the idea of formal training gaining a small foothold—10% of rural preachers in his sample were seminary-educated—but the predominance of the untrained remained a serious problem. “This is a most significant fact

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<sup>18</sup> W.H. Holloway, “A Black Belt County” in Du Bois et al, *The Negro Church* 61

<sup>19</sup> Jesse Moorland, “Demand and Supply of Increased Efficiency” 6-8

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* 10

for the character of rural religion,” he wrote. “It jeopardizes the whole task of propagating and transmitting Christianity in enlightened and practicable forms.”<sup>21</sup> Ralph Felton argued similarly in his 1950 study *These My Brethren*. “Their pastoral leadership is not trained to interpret religion in terms of daily living,” and so “the blind keep leading the blind.”<sup>22</sup>

White denominational leaders expressed similar severe concern about a rural scene dominated by “untrained” preachers. “The most serious of all problems connected with the welfare of the rural churches of the South is the problem of securing properly trained leaders and pastors,” the Southern Baptist Convention argued in its 1923 report, having analyzed the results of their massive 1922 study of rural Baptist churches.<sup>23</sup> Seminary professor J.W. Jent concurred, and in his 1924 lectures *The Challenge of the Country Church*, he asserted that “the ultimate challenge is the right kind of pastor.” This was a critical situation, because “the average country pastor is utterly *inefficient*.”<sup>24</sup> From the Ozarks, home missionary D.H. Howerton pleaded with the Convention to create an infrastructure for the training of rural preachers. “Few conventions, institutes and other schools of instruction and inspiration are ever held in these undeveloped places,” he lamented, and so “these churches are ministered to by preachers of limited capacity and vision, and often no training except such as they get from the church itself.”<sup>25</sup> In his own focused study *The Country Preacher*, Jeff Ray honored the work of the untrained early Baptists—“I stand with uncovered head in the presence of the mighty work done by uneducated country preachers in the romantic history of our country”—but went on to argue that “we may all well realize that we have come to a new day,” that “in this complicated modern life effective

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<sup>21</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 91

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Felton, *These My Brethren* 29

<sup>23</sup> *Southern Baptist Convention Handbook 1923*

<sup>24</sup> J.W. Jent, *The Challenge of the Country Church* 135

<sup>25</sup> *Our Home Field* 8/21

leadership is impossible to a pastor whose hands are tied to a plow or a jack-plane.”<sup>26</sup> To inspire hope Ray gave a few accounts of educated, reform-minded ministers who went into rural communities with a mission of uplift, but warned that this was a tiny phenomenon and that the rural situation remained dire. “But if one is thrilled as he reads the record of the transformation of these backward, backwoods communities by the magic touch and quickening presence of *a real man* [my italics], it only serves to intensify his sense of depression when he turns from that to see in our own fair land hundreds and even thousands of country churches and communities withering into inert desuetude and even noxious decay for the want of some such broad, capable, manly, consecrated, undivided, unselfish leadership.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the rural preacher’s “unmanly” lack of training, he was rarely, in the bourgeois critique, a permanent enough figure in the community to be an inspiring leader. “The average country preacher is with his people two days out of a month,” Jeff Ray lamented.<sup>28</sup> On the percentage scale he devised to judge the “efficiency” of Southern Baptist churches, J.W. Jent assigned a significant amount of points (16) to full-time, resident pastors—and he went on to note that by this standard, most rural churches were ranked “poor.”<sup>29</sup> “The one great problem, underlying all other problems, is the problem of the *Pastor*,” white denominational reformer Spencer King charged in 1928. “The *Pastor* is the supreme problem of the rural church. One phase of the problem is that so often the pastor is not a pastor at all, but just a preacher who comes once a month.”<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson agreed. “The rural minister, because of his absentee relationship, is more often a preacher than he is a pastor,” they noted

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<sup>26</sup> Jeff Ray, *The Country Preacher* 34,61

<sup>27</sup> Ray 23

<sup>28</sup> Ray 50

<sup>29</sup> Jent, *Challenge of the Country Church* 57-61 for the scorecard, 103 for the assessment of the typical rural church.

<sup>30</sup> Spencer King, *Georgia—A Mission Field* 1928, quoted in Arthur Raper, *Preface to Peasantry* 359

with concern.<sup>31</sup> In his fieldwork in the mid-forties, Harry Richardson found that only 14 of 108 rural preachers lived in the same community as the churches they pastored. He attributed it to entrenched custom, “a historic hangover from the old circuit riding days when a preacher’s sole mission was to preach the word and win converts. This idea still holds firmly in the country, despite the modern change to the ‘station’ or pastoral concept of the ministerial office. The result is that preaching in the city and country are not thought of in the same terms...For the urban church pastoral visiting is planned as an essential part of the ministerial program. It is not regarded as equally necessary for the rural church...the pastor does not plan to do much visiting in the country, and the people do not expect it...How long the country Christian will continue to support a ministry whose primary function is to bring a thrill once or twice a month is of course an open question.”<sup>32</sup>

One of these peripatetic men, an “untrained” black preacher and small farmer named Washington Phillips, knew these criticisms, and composed his own response in song. Phillips preached in the rural communities of Freestone County, Texas from the early twentieth century until his death in 1954. “I have never been to no college,” he sang as a rebuke, “and I didn’t get a chance in school/ but when Jesus Christ anointed me to preach the gospel/ he sure didn’t leave me no fool/ oh yes, I am born to preach the gospel/...well we have lots of educated preachers/ that’s fixed up in the head/ and got their hearts unfixed with God/ and walkin’ around spiritual dead/...well you take old Nicodemus/ well they made him out a ruler to rule/ well he went by night to meet Jesus/ and he found himself an educated fool.”<sup>33</sup> On “Denomination Blues Part Two” he echoed this critique. “There’s another class of preachers that’s high in speech/ they had

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<sup>31</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* 17

<sup>32</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 97,99

<sup>33</sup> Washington Phillips, “I Am Born to Preach the Gospel” (recorded 4/28) on Phillips, *The Key to the Kingdom* Yazoo, 2005

to go to college to learn how to preach and that's all/ I tell you that's all/ but you better have Jesus now/ I tell you that's all/...that college man he's hard to convince/ a man can't preach unless'n he's sent and that'all/ I tell you that's all."<sup>34</sup> Under the title of "That's All," this song—whether Phillips' own composition or a floating folk lyric in unclear—was picked up by the Arkansas-born black evangelist Rosetta Tharpe and the Kentucky-born white singer Merle Travis. What Phillips defended in these songs, and what bourgeois reformers attacked, was a durable and powerful rural tradition.

In their own accounts of themselves, rural preachers agreed that they had no "training" But for them this took on a very different meaning than it did for their critics. In the early 1930s, doing fieldwork for *The Negro's Church*, Benjamin Mays listened with concern as a rural black preacher told his congregation, "I saw a man preaching the other day who had a lot of education. He did not know how to preach. You can get your Bachelor of Arts and your Master of Arts degrees, and you can pile up knowledge, but still you will be a fool. Some fools can preach better than these educated men...The life of Jesus sets a wonderful example. Jesus did not study books. Peter, James, John, Philip and others were ignorant men. They had knowledge of the law of Jesus Christ; but they did not go to school...I may not know the eight parts of speech, but I know the Bible. Glory to His Name!"<sup>35</sup> In Gee's Bend later in the decade, Nathaniel Colley found that "none of the ministers have any formal training. The majority of them were graduated from the elementary school...One minister told the writer that the ability to read was a help to one preaching, but in the event of inability to read God would put words into his mouth."<sup>36</sup> Among white mountaineers and miners, Jim Garland recalled of his youth in eastern Kentucky in the 20s and 30s, "mountain people believe[d] a man is called to preach the gospel. If he can, he is

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<sup>34</sup> Phillips, "Denomination Blues Part Two" (recorded 5/27) on *Key to the Kingdom*

<sup>35</sup> Mays and Nicholson, *Negro's Church* 248

<sup>36</sup> Nathaniel Colley, "Exploratory Study" 9

supposed to read the scripture, but if God wants him to preach, even if he cannot read or write, his mouth will be filled with the gospel.”<sup>37</sup>

G.W. Blevins, a miner, farmer, and preacher in Wise County, Virginia, recalled in 1939 how “the burden fell on me to preach.” Blevins was deeply resistant: “I tried to get out of it, and I prayed and I done everything in the world, and it just followed me up and followed me up. And I closed my eyes for sleep and my sleep finally just about left me. And when I closed my eyes for sleep, I’d see great crowds of people and me preaching to them just as hard as I could preach. And when I’d get happy and wake up then I’d criticize myself and say it can’t never be—I’m too ignorant, I don’t know anything, I don’t know anything about the Bible—and that just kept following me up, that burden. I’d make all excuses...” Blevins continued trying to dodge his burden, but one night as he slept he had a vision of a specific chapter and verse. At the subsequent evening church service, he was asked to read a passage. He opened the Bible and began speaking, and was overcome in a kind of ecstasy. Some time later, “when I came to myself,” his first sermon had been delivered and the Bible was laying on the floor.<sup>38</sup>

Speaking in the same year as Blevins, “Rev. Renfrew” (Alan Lomax’s pseudonym for the elderly black preacher whose life story forms a central part of his portrait of black folk religion) recalled his own opposition to his call.

I had felt before that I was called to preach; but I just didn’t want to. I was in Oklahoma at the time, and something just come down on me all at once till I couldn’t rest. I went to take the train and the man in the station says to me, ‘Preacher, where are you goin?’ Same way in the train—the porter says to me, ‘Preacher, where you goin?’ I got off the train in Oklahoma City and I was a stranger there. I seen a colored man and a white man talking together, and I went up to ask about finding me a room. When I got to them they was talking Scripture and for some reason they stopped and asked my opinion. I began talking and it seems to have interested them so much, they just hushed and let me have it. When I had finished, the white fellow said to me, ‘I want you to go home with me Sunday.’ ‘Why?’ I asked him. ‘I have a lot of colored people out there and they told me

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<sup>37</sup> Julia Ardery, ed. *Welcome the Traveler Home* 29

<sup>38</sup> G.W. Blevins, Archive of Folk Culture AFS 2766A-2767A

when I found a man that was preachin the truth to bring him out there.’ ‘But I’m not a preacher,’ I said. ‘Well, you’re Jonah then,’ he told me. ‘You remember how God sent Jonah to Nineveh and he tried to run away and what happened to *him*.’

Though troubled by these events, Renfrew continued to resist the call and rented land to farm.

His wife got sick and left to go back to her parents. One night as Renfrew was riding his mule on a country road he saw a light shining behind him.

That made me feel kind of funny, because I could look each way and see no light, couldn’t see why there would be rays of light and no light to make them...I went on, thinking about what I had seen, and looked up, and there it was shinin in front of me. Now the light was behind me and before me. I felt like I was in a dream or something. I stepped off my old mule and looked down at the gravels and I could see a border, a sharp border, between the light and the shadow. Finally I just stepped into the light and, when I did, it just seemed like something come up my leg, just like when your foot goes to sleep...And I knelt down in the light and prayed. I don’t know how long I was in that place, but finally I said, ‘Well, maybe something’s gonna happen to me. Don’t know what it is.’ And I got up off my knees and I stepped out of the light, and it just seemed like something say to me, ‘You ought to have pulled off your shoes.’ And I said, ‘Lord, I didn’t know.’

Renfrew began preaching but was barely present for his first sermon. “It seemed like something had holt of me,” he remembered. “When I kind of come to myself, the people was sheddin tears all around me. I couldn’t say what I’d done, but the old deacon told everybody that I had preached just about as fine a sermon as he’d want to hear.”<sup>39</sup>

Of the Sumter County, Alabama farmer who preached to her when she was young, Vera Hall recalled in the late 1940s:

He told us in church one time how the Lord called him. Something come to him one night and told him, ‘I want you to preach,’ but he didn’t believe it. Then somebody come to him another night in his sleep and they brought an open book to him and he couldn’t tell what kind of book it was and he said, ‘Let’s see on the back.’ Then they turned the book over and it was a Holy Bible—wrote in big letters on the back of it. And the person said, ‘I want you to read this.’ He had all this come to him, but still he decided in his mind that he wasn’t gonna preach. ‘I don’t want to be a preacher and I’m not gonna preach,’ he said. That night his mother come to him in his sleep. She’d been dead a long time, but she come back. He knowed he was asleep, *believed* he was. She come and she shook him. Look like when he opened his eyes he looked right into her face and she was smiling and she says, ‘You got that to do.’ He says, ‘What, Mama?’ She says, ‘You’ve got to preach.’

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<sup>39</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Rainbow Sign* 155-157



He didn't sleep all night long. Said, 'Well, sir,'—he told this to a church house full of people—said, 'Well, sir, the Lord called me and now he've done sent my mother to me, so I reckon I'll have to preach.' Say, 'Lord, I don't know what in the world I'll say. I can't read, can't write. I don't know a word in the Bible. I don't know how to *be* a preacher, but I promise you I'll preach till I die.'<sup>40</sup>

Tom Bronner, a black sharecropper in Bolivar County, Mississippi, told how he

adamantly resisted the call to preach as a young man in the 1930s, until finally it became impossible and he was helpless:

And I was on my way home on a dirt road beside a canal ditch that led into the bogue where I lived. And I was walking, stepping. Now it didn't slip up on me, the Lord had been worrying me a long time about preaching. And I talked to God like I'm talking to you. I said, 'I ain't gonna preach.' But something was within me, was, just like I'm talking to you, saying, 'I mean for you to preach.' I say, 'I ain't got sense enough to preach. You get after someone else. Let me do what I'm doing.'...As I was stepping I got paralyzed. The Lord knows I'm telling you the truth. I couldn't move. I had my same mind. I had my same eyes. I could see my same person sitting on the bogue. I couldn't lift my feet. I said, 'Lord.' I couldn't, but I tried. While I was standing there talking back to God he was talking to me. I could hear the voice saying, 'I say preach.' I said, 'No, I ain't.' And I stood there arguing with God about what I was going to do. It looked like I come to my sense. I said, 'Well, if you let me go home, I'll preach.' And my legs started walking. I walked up to the house...<sup>41</sup>

Quincy Higgins, after his own resistance to his call, struck a similar desperate deal with God. A white small farmer in Alleghany County, North Carolina, Higgins recounted the bargain he made in 1930:

Well, I didn't aim to become a preacher. Law, no, I, I was a—they's something in here that kept knocking and knocking and knocking. Well, I wasn't the man; I wanted to put it off on good men...I wasn't the man. But by and by, I got to where I couldn't go no further. We had an awful—we lived down at the old place, and had an awful sweet little boy, second boy. He's just short and stout, and fluffy, and intelligent, and he'd come way out to the road to meet me, to get on the wagon and ride back to the house. One night my wife waked me up, and says, 'This youngun's a dying. This youngun's a dying.' Well, the very minute she got me awake, I knowed what the trouble was. Well, they's a neighbor that lived right across the hill there. And I got the lantern, I got the fire built, and the lamp lit, and I grabbed the lantern, went over after her. After she come, and she took the baby in her arms, and went over him and looked at him, and she said, 'Quincy, you better get a doctor here, as quick as you can. This baby's gonna die.' Well, I started right up, went out the road, that's on horseback. Got over down there, in a mile half, two

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<sup>40</sup> Lomax, *Rainbow Sign* 53

<sup>41</sup> Tom Rankin, *Sacred Space* 19-20

miles of Sparta. I said, 'Lord, if you let that baby live, I'll take that Book and do the best I can.' And I went on, got the doctor, and come on back home, and I went in, and I says, 'Mamma, how's that baby?' Says, 'He's better.' I says, 'How long'd I been gone?' Says, 'You been gone about a hour. And his breath just cleared up.' You know, you're bound to acknowledge then....Well, I took that Book, and I started out.<sup>42</sup>

Though not always speaking at such length (or at least when a recording auditor was there), other rural preachers had similar accounts of their resistance to their call, and their sense of their own inability. Samuel Adams, a white farmer and folk doctor in eastern Kentucky, recalled in 1939 how he was "struck" by a voice that said, "you've got to preach the gospel, or die." Adams was illiterate and knew he could not read the Bible, but he also knew that "there's one that could preach and that is God."<sup>43</sup> Henry Truvillion, a worker in the lumber camps of east Texas, remembered in 1940 that he resisted the call to preach—for eighteen years, before he had a vision and knew that he could resist no longer.<sup>44</sup> Elihu Trusty, a coal miner near Paintsville, Kentucky, told in 1937 how he was overcome by a sense that he could not understand the Bible. He fasted for a time, and then one day in the mines, he lay down in muddy water and pleaded with God to speak to him. A voice said, "you go and preach," but this was not what Trusty expected to hear. "I can't read, how can I preach," he responded three times. Then, he had a vision like Peter's on the rooftop, and he went home that night, opened the Bible, and read it.<sup>45</sup> Sherwin Sizemore, in a sermon to coal miners near Pineville, Kentucky in 1938, finished with this self-description: "I just felt the Lord wanted me to deliver this message. I'm ignorant, I'm unlearned—of course I'm no fool, not by any means—I'm just a fool for Christ's sake...As far as education is concerned my education is very limited but I'm glad tonight that I know the Lord."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Patrick Mullen, *Listening to Old Voices* 186-187

<sup>43</sup> Samuel Adams, Archive of Folk Culture AFS 2793B-2794B

<sup>44</sup> Henry Truvillion, Archive of Folk Culture AFS 3983A

<sup>45</sup> Elihu Trusty, Archive of Folk Culture AFS 1398A2-B1

<sup>46</sup> Sherwin Sizemore, Archive of Folk Culture AFS 1958A-1960A

The similar features in these accounts suggest an oral form like that of the testimony (chapter 5), with regularized features and meaning acquired through communal sanction and recognition. In explaining the idea of the “vision,” folklorist Zora Neale Hurston noted in the early 30s that it was part of two ritualized, narratively-rendered experiences: the conversion and the call to preach. While in conversion stories the initiate might seek God, “the call to preach is altogether external. The vision seeks the man. Punishment follows if he does not heed the call, or until he answers. In conversion, then, we have the cultural pattern of the person seeking the vision...In the call to preach we have the involuntary vision—the call seeking the man.”<sup>47</sup> Hurston’s reflections indicate that stories of callings to preach were as numerous and widespread as the testimonies, even though written or recorded accounts are less numerous and widespread. At two generations’ remove, the older people of Dyess can not recount such full narrative accounts, but they do remember the preachers as being “called,” they note that strange stories of visions would not have been unusual, and J.E. Huff recalls that people in the community thought Jack Cash was “special” and would have been a preacher.<sup>48</sup> Such memories help situate Johnny Cash’s own public recollections of his brother. “About the time I was eleven years old,” he wrote in *Man in Black*, “Jack, who was thirteen, informed us one day that he had been called to preach...I remember Jack’s Bible so well. It was a little, tiny thing—the complete Bible in very small print. Jack just about wore it out. He took it with him everywhere he went—to school, to work, to church, and he studied it by the hour.”<sup>49</sup> Jack’s articulation of his “call” followed the logic of the more elaborate narratives; one day this thirteen year old began to tell others of his reception of a divine summons. His subsequent fervent Bible study was part of his own

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<sup>47</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* 87. The title of this 1981 collection is somewhat misleading. “The Sanctified Church,” Hurston’s analysis of Holiness-Pentecostalism, is only one of the previously unpublished essays. The others treat more generalized regional religious phenomena.

<sup>48</sup> Author interviews with A.J. Henson, Calvin Dallas, and J.E. Huff, January 9-10, 2006

<sup>49</sup> Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* 13. See also Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 30

“training.” Both the possibility of such a call and its communal sanction were rendered imaginable by an existing religious culture—and one that bourgeois reformers were determined to change.

Like the testimony, preachers’ accounts of the call were narrative vehicles for expressing a theological point. This point can be missed, however, if we assume that these preachers were simply and plainly stating their lack of formal education, sometimes even to the point of illiteracy. As various preachers and careful observers made clear, the preachers were “trained” through a well-developed oral culture and their own attentive study of the Bible. One rural white preacher explained himself to Presbyterian home missionary R.P. Smith in the early decades of the century.

I got to go to school one week when something happened at home to stop me and I never got to go any more. That week I learned all the letters by heart...I married and my wife and I had a hard time; we were so poor. Along there a great change came over my life. At a revival meeting I was converted and a strong feeling came into my heart that I ought to preach the Gospel. I wondered how I could since I was not able to read and study the Bible. Still I could not get rid of the feeling that I must obey the call and in some way prepare myself for the work. I got a Testament with big print. I remembered the letters and could name them in the words, but could not pronounce any of the words. When my neighbors that could read came in, I got them to pronounce for me. Soon I knew a number of words by sight, like ‘the,’ ‘it,’ ‘was,’ ‘man,’ ‘God,’ ‘Lord,’ and so forth. In this way I learned to read tolerably well, but it took a long time. I did most of my studying at night because I had to work in daylight and support my family. I was too poor to buy a lamp and oil. Sometimes I had tallow candles, and when they gave out, I made dip-candles.<sup>50</sup>

This man was not formally trained, and certainly his independent studying of the Bible did not constitute the “training” that bourgeois reformers wanted to see, but his own labor was rigorous and determined.

Jim Garland, whose father Oliver was a sharecropper, miner, herb doctor, singer, and preacher, explained another dynamic in his recollections. “Those of my father’s generation who

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<sup>50</sup> R.P. Smith, *Experiences in Mountain Mission Work* 94

could not read or write often knew entire passages from the Bible by heart because they had heard passages read and discussed so often around the fireside at home...The Bible, the only book in many mountain homes, became part of a young boy's store of knowledge."<sup>51</sup> Like the remarkable body of songs that Jim, his sister Sarah, and half-sister Molly preserved and perpetuated in "folk" circles into the 1960s, biblical stories were part of an oral tradition that the "untrained" preacher could draw on even if they were not literate.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, in his study of the black tenants of Gee's Bend, Nathaniel Colley carefully noted that the rural preachers' "memories...seem to be uncannily developed. They have, by simply repeatedly hearing them read, committed to memory many passages from the Bible."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, in his 1950 regional study of rural black churches, Ralph Felton argued that "untrained ministers learn a pattern of preaching from other ministers, largely by a process of imitation."<sup>54</sup> Chapter 7 will examine the oral culture and its meaning in greater depth, but here the point is that rural preachers did bring something to the table: immersion in an oral culture that developed remarkable memory, and devoted individual study of the Bible.

In their own accounts and in self-description, however, they played up their own inadequacy. This can be confusing, and certainly was to a condescending observer of a rural white community in the eastern Tennessee mountains. In 1913 she sent in this report to the Baptist periodical *Our Home Field*: "Occasionally a 'poor weak servant of the Lord,' as he aptly describes himself, straggles into the settlement and preaches in the log school house in an effort,

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<sup>51</sup> Ardery, ed. *Welcome the Traveler Home* 29

<sup>52</sup> Jim and Sarah—as Sarah Ogan Gunning—recorded a host of songs for the Archive of Folk Culture in the 1930s, and took part in the folk revival of the 1960s. Molly—Aunt Molly Jackson in folk circles—became well-known as a labor organizer and singer in leftist circles in the 30s, and was a main character in the Lomaxes' *Our Singing Country*.

<sup>53</sup> Nathaniel Colley, "Exploratory Study" 9

<sup>54</sup> Ralph Felton, *These My Brethren* 53

he announces, ‘to help save his own soul.’”<sup>55</sup> We can mimic this missionary’s valuations and take this preacher’s statements at face value, as expressions of his poverty and his awareness of his own insufficiency for the task. Or, we can read them more critically, as rhetorical devices to depict his strange status. Whatever skill or talent he might have, he announces, is irrelevant—he is just a “poor weak servant”—and far from leading people into uplift through his own expert guidance, his message applies as much to himself as to them. This was just the kind of self-deprecation and self-denial that Jeff Ray had in mind when he lamented the absence of “a real man.” And here we can see the principal differences in rural and urban ideas of the preacher: the one was a liminal figure who (whatever immersion in oral tradition or labor in Bible reading) exaggerated his lack of any inherent ability for the sake of accentuating the message of God, the other a credentialed, formally trained religious professional who embodied reasons why he should be a leader in both church and community. The one was an enigmatic figure of mystery, the other a model of modern professionalization.

Paul Harvey has been the leading historian to demonstrate and interpret the spread of this professional ethos in the New South era, arguing that in the period 1870-1925, white and black “denominational modernizers spread the gospel of pastoring as a vocation rather than a calling,” and that leading ministers’ autobiographies described their decision to become preachers “more through a gradual realization of their professional talents and a conviction of duty than through any epiphany.”<sup>56</sup> Urban ministers “cultivated restraint and decorum,” or as white Baptist leader B.F. Riley put it in his 1887 sketch of the ideal minister: “his bearing is that of a respectable gentleman always, coupled with a consciousness of his true manhood.”<sup>57</sup> Such manhood

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<sup>55</sup> *Our Home Field* 11/13

<sup>56</sup> Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South* 138; Paul Harvey, “The Ideal of Professionalism and the White Southern Baptist Ministry 1870-1920” 104. For a full treatment, see *Redeeming the South* 137-194

<sup>57</sup> Harvey, *Redeeming the South* 138; Harvey, “The Ideal of Professionalism” 116

demanded a firm grasp of the issues of the era, a confidence based in the security of knowledge, and developed, demonstrable talents that commanded social respect.

As Harvey demonstrates, these ideals crossed the color line, even as they could take on differing meanings. “Three-fourths of the Baptist ministers and two-thirds of the Methodist are unfit, either mentally or morally, or both, to preach the Gospel to any one or to attempt to lead any one,” Ida B. Wells alleged near the turn of the century, and AME bishop Henry McNeal Turner agreed that “the average Negro preacher is a curse to his race.”<sup>58</sup> In contrast, in 1909 black professor Jesse Moorland imagined the idealized minister as an apostle of uplift, the principal “race man:” “the Negro minister ought to be the best trained man among us in order that he may be able to assume his rightful place as a leader of the people...he will be a leader in devising ways and means to get our people out of the crowded alleys into the bright sunshine of life that there they may be where their little children may have a chance for true development.”<sup>59</sup> Though lamenting that “the belief is still held by many people that the minister...is God’s ambassador on earth,” Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson noted hopeful signs in their 1933 *The Negro’s Church* that the old mysticism was declining. Of the urban scene they wrote, “a minister is respected in the community now, not because he claims to be ‘called’ by God to preach, but because as an individual he has admirable qualities, merits recognition, and has a unique contribution to make to life.”<sup>60</sup> For white Baptist leader Edwin Potteat, the ideal minister was to be the dominant shaping force in southern society, and his 1935 *The Reverend John Doe, D.D.* enumerated the traits that such a man should embody if we were to deserve such a place. He should be sincere, courageous, well-informed, public-spirited, punctilious in moral

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<sup>58</sup> Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South* 164; William Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865-1900* 334

<sup>59</sup> Jesse Moorland, “Demand and Supply of an Increased Efficiency” 8, 11-12

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *Negro’s Church* 10, 50

obligations, up-to-date in applying religion to life, and agreeable company.<sup>61</sup> Poteat received mixed responses to a survey he took among bourgeois laypeople in North Carolina, but many commended their ministers for exhibiting these traits. “The modern minister, while devout, is a decided change over the ‘old-timer’ who wore a long face,” one person wrote, and “by taking part in social and civic life [the modern minister] has commanded the attention of the curbstoep philosophers and drug store loafers as well as the saints.”<sup>62</sup> Another was “encouraged by an increasing number of better informed and progressive-minded ministers.”<sup>63</sup> In his study of the white churches of the thriving textile mill town of Gastonia, North Carolina in the late 30s, Liston Pope found similar valuations, that the minister was “exemplar and chief practitioner” of what Christianity ought to look like, “that a minister ought to be a leader in all community enterprises,” that he “ought to be a good fellow in private life, joining civic clubs, attending baseball games, and the like.”<sup>64</sup> Imagining these ideals into the dormant countryside, white Baptist seminary professor J.W. Jent and Tuskegee chaplain Harry Richardson gave examples of what a professionally-trained, civic-minded minister could do to uplift and galvanize a rural community.<sup>65</sup>

Civic betterment or racial uplift began, though, with rigorous academic training and formal credentialization. “As the people advance in intelligence there must be a corresponding advance in the preachers,” North Carolina’s white Baptist newspaper argued in 1894, and in the New South era regional denominations established seminaries to supply an informed class of

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<sup>61</sup> Edwin Poteat, *Reverend John Doe, D.D.: A Study of the Place of the Minister in the Modern World* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935):38

<sup>62</sup> Poteat 53

<sup>63</sup> Poteat 51

<sup>64</sup> Liston Pope, *Millhands and Preachers* 93

<sup>65</sup> J.W. Jent, *Challenge of the Country Church* 63ff; Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 190-191



preachers.<sup>66</sup> Chapter 3 showed the statistics on how many ministers were actually being graduated from these seminaries, but what matters here are the differing rural and urban ideals, and their meaning in the New South context.<sup>67</sup>

The ideal of professionalism, of an expert with a certain distinct social role to play, was of course not unique to the South or to bourgeois Protestant notions of the minister. In the course of the nineteenth century, in the United States and western Europe, innovative reformers began to spread the idea that certain trades needed regularized standards, an established and public system of training, and permanent institutions to vigilantly maintain and perpetuate these norms. These ideals won victories in different places in different times, but in a host of trades that had once been open to “folk” training and knowledge via tradition—medicine, law, history-writing, agriculture—new formalized patterns came to replace the old ones. The establishment of organizations like the American Medical Association, the American Historical Association, and the Extension Service were hallmarks of this new ethos, and their rise to positions of cultural power made it increasingly difficult for the uncredentialed to participate in the new “professions.”

A significant element in this movement was a new confidence in the power of science, or, the belief that through knowledge people could gain control over the forces that seemed to hold sway over their lives. Frederick Taylor showed that the arena of business management could be ordered by the power of science, Seaman Knapp and Extension Service agents took notions of scientific agriculture into the countryside, and historians William E. Dodd and Frederick Jackson

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<sup>66</sup> A few were established in the late antebellum era, but most were New South creations. See Harvey, *Redeeming the South* 145-152, 180-186

<sup>67</sup> Chapter 3 showed the following disparities in formal training as noted in the 1926 *Census of Religious Bodies* (the percentages are for ministers without college or seminary training): Southern Baptist Convention urban 29.6, rural 69.7; Methodist Episcopal Church, South urban 47.8, rural 67.3; Negro Baptists urban 63, rural 84.1; African Methodist Episcopal urban 58.8, rural 79.9. These figures overemphasize the rural percentages, because they note only those preachers who actively identified with a specific denomination, but nevertheless they demonstrate disparities.

Turner called for an objective, empiricist historical method to displace romance and hagiography wrapped in florid prose. These specific actions embodied an Enlightenment faith in the power of human rationality, of human beings' ability to fathom what their ancestors had believed were the perennial mysteries of the world that one might navigate but could never control.

The story of professionalism and its new ethos is relatively familiar, but the extension of its influence into Baptist and Methodist ranks in the New South is definitely not. These were the very groups that originated and spread through the work of eighteenth-century folk exhorters, and the New South—the image still lingers—was a benighted region: “scarcely any generation of Southerners, save that which wrestled with the frontier, was so completely isolated from the main streams of Western culture,” C. Vann Woodward argued in 1951 for a trope that still has currency.<sup>68</sup> However, if we look back at sources from the era, sources in which New South Protestant leaders articulated a sense of professional ministerial identity in contrast to their humble “folk” beginnings and their contemporaneous rural others, central aspects of scientific, professional thinking are transparent. In their own critiques of rural preachers (see above), bourgeois Protestants expressed an idea of history as a narrative of progress, of the need for formal training and institutional credentialization, a repulsion toward a sense of mystery, and a sense that professional education was intrinsic to the vital and massive task of exerting manly control over the patterns of the social order.

By contrast, the rural preachers who gave accounts of themselves, and the pattern in rural churches of recognizing the idea of the “call,” articulated a sense of mystery antithetical to ideas

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<sup>68</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* 454. Also, “wilderness towns of the eighteenth-century South were often in closer touch with the wellsprings of Western civilization than were the industrial cities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” Donald Mathews and Jane De Hart’s *Sex, Gender, and the Politics of ERA: A State and the Nation* (1990) and Fitzhugh Brundage’s *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia 1880-1930* (1993) are two more recent works that use the image of a “traditional” South barely touched by “modernist” culture of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

of scientific professionalism, and this is their central meaning in the context of the New South. In their earliest appearance in the South, in the eighteenth century when a classically-trained Anglican or Presbyterian clergy possessed significant power, Baptist and Methodist preachers with their simple “call” were democratic enthusiasts. The call was radically open—to slave or free, male or female, blacksmith or doctor—and was criticized by the learned ministers for its leveling spirit and its dangerous “enthusiasm,” or sense that God’s Spirit could work freely and was not bound to the patterns of tradition. Slowly, as Christine Heyrman and others have demonstrated, the call became much less open and much less enthusiastic, as the most prominent of Baptist and Methodist ministers began to move in elite, learned planter circles as “gentleman theologians” in the antebellum era and then as “God’s public relations experts” in the New South.<sup>69</sup>

One could argue that rural Protestants were simply making a virtue of necessity, that lacking access to professionalizing institutions, they celebrated “folk” ignorance. Or perhaps the rural preacher simply possessed esteem by default. Carter Woodson argued that “the rural Negroes, who because of custom and social and economic handicaps cannot develop any other professional class, must look to their clergy.”<sup>70</sup> However, even critics confessed that given options to an educated, professionalized clergy, rural people, preachers or laity, did not want them. In his 1930 portrait of the “Bungler” family of poor whites in Georgia, Presbyterian minister Ira Caldwell recorded the criticisms he heard, that “most of them do not believe in a ‘new fangled gospel preached by preachers of high learning.’”<sup>71</sup> Home missionary R.P. Smith admitted, based on his work in the North Carolina mountains from 1900-1930, that “some of

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<sup>69</sup> E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentleman Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture 1795-1860* (Durham: Duke University, 1978); Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South* 138

<sup>70</sup> Carter Woodson, *Rural Negro* 149

<sup>71</sup> Ira Caldwell, *The Bunglers* 24

those brethren were not altogether co-operative and cordial...They charged that we had only a religion of book learning, that we did not believe in heartfelt religion, that we preached for money to get an easy way to live without working.”<sup>72</sup> In his fieldwork in Wilcox County, Alabama in the late 40s, Morton Rubin noted the Branchley family, former tenants who were rising economically in the post-war scene but who rejected the town churches and instead sought “real religion” in a country church where “they concern themselves with teaching about God rather than with ‘show.’”<sup>73</sup> In a similar vein, Carter Woodson confessed that “most rural preachers are still skeptical about the religion of the educated classes, as hundreds of questionnaires filled out and returned attest.”<sup>74</sup> Studying rural black communities in the late 40s, Ralph Felton found rural congregations not just content but deeply respectful of their farmer-preachers, and was compelled to admit that the custom of the called preacher existed because people wanted it that way. “The tragedy of the situation,” he wrote, “rests in the fact that the congregation will not call a man of keen intelligence and alertness for its leadership. They have been placed in a rut by the fifty-five years of continued omission and complacency and are thus stunted by their own leadership.”<sup>75</sup> Chapter 7 will challenge this latter claim by exploring the rich oral tradition that preachers were instrumental in sustaining, but for now it is important to note that the figure of the called preacher depended on a shared web of belief among both preacher and hearers, one that expressed its own valuations, and that persisted in the face of bourgeois critique.

Or did it? Scattered evidence suggests that the ideal of the educated professional did make some headway in rural communities. Of his youth in Amite County, Mississippi, Will

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<sup>72</sup> R.P. Smith, *Experiences in Mountain Mission Work* 95

<sup>73</sup> Morton Rubin, *Plantation County* 120

<sup>74</sup> Woodson, *Rural Negro* 172

<sup>75</sup> Ralph Felton, *These My Brethren* 57

Campbell recalled that “already the public relations of ‘Fulltime Christian Service’ was beginning to lean heavily on the academy. Already, even in rural Mississippi in 1918, the notion was getting around that the Jesus story was so complicated that only the learned could convey.”<sup>76</sup> Of the five white preachers in the rural community of Gorgas, Alabama that they studied in the mid-30s, Paul Terry and Verner Sims found one who had two years of education in a Methodist college and some theological courses, and whose “form of worship was the most restrained.”<sup>77</sup> In Wilcox County, Alabama in the late 40s, Morton Rubin found that black “young people with their educated ways demand a preacher who is more than a country farmhand who got a ‘calling’ one day and began to ‘feel a lightness and a oneness with God.’”<sup>78</sup> But Ralph Felton’s extensive 1949 study of rural blacks noted that the preachers’ “call to the ministry in many cases was a dramatic and ‘mystical’ event rather than an educational process,” and that 70% of sampled preachers described their call as a “mystical ‘inner urge’” or “sudden revelation.”<sup>79</sup> Taken as a whole, such evidence suggests a shift to a new mentality, but a very slow and gradual one: folklorists in the 1970s and 80s continued to find rural churches that stoutly maintained the idea of the calling and its sense of mystery.<sup>80</sup>

In the New South context, rural Protestants’ perpetuation and deepening of the tradition of the call was less a democratic enthusiast action—with the exception of the small Holiness-Pentecostal movement, the call was imagined as coming only to men—than a mystical one that placed a premium on human ignorance and dramatized the mysterious workings of God. In the narratives that they told in the New South, rural preachers articulated the severe limits of human

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<sup>76</sup> Will Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* 43

<sup>77</sup> Paul Terry and Verner Sims, *They Live on the Land* 153

<sup>78</sup> Morton Rubin, *Plantation County* 141

<sup>79</sup> Ralph Felton, *These My Brethren* 62,64

<sup>80</sup> Brett Sutton, “Speech, Chant, and Song” in Tyson, Peacock, Patterson, eds. *Diversities of Gifts* [fieldwork 1976-1980 with black Primitive Baptists in western North Carolina]; Howard Dorgan, “He Will Give You a Sermon” in Wilson, ed. *Cultural Perspectives on the American South Volume 5* [fieldwork 1980s with white Old Regular Baptists in eastern Kentucky and southwest Virginia].

capability: they resisted the call, pleaded their own insufficiency, were not the agents of either the inspiration to preach or the preaching itself, and bore a burden that made them not expert leaders but simply “poor weak servants of the Lord.” This practice was analogous to rural Protestant images of evil (chapter 4), which drew on a trope that marked early evangelicalism and imbued it with new meaning in the early twentieth century. If, a century and a half before, upstart evangelical preachers challenged a gentry-dominated social order and a hierarchical Anglican church that helped to fortify it, so in the New South the anti-professional called preacher marked a rejection of ideals of professionalization that were critical to the bourgeoisie’s claim to social leadership. One does not have to read reformers’ critiques of the called preacher too closely to sense a feeling of antagonism—and envy. For what rural Protestants enacted in their practice of the called preacher was a sense of openness to mystery, a feeling that a divine message came from outside the ordered structures that human beings create.

There was another principal way in which rural Protestants of the New South articulated ideas of mystery, and that was in the foreboding sense of death that they embodied in a wide catalogue of songs. Death would seem to be the perennial human limit, but as Philippe Aries argued in *The Hour of Our Death*, his sweeping study of changing attitudes and practices surrounding death, urban, industrial Western societies began to “banish” death in the twentieth century by removing it from public visibility.<sup>81</sup> In her study of mid-nineteenth century “consolation literature” of the Northern United States, Ann Douglas chronicled how Protestant ministers elaborated their own way of banishing death by sentimentalizing it and removing any sense of terror or awe.<sup>82</sup> The rough contemporaneity of the professionalizing crusade and this banishing of death is no coincidence: as the optimistic, scientific faith of human control informed

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<sup>81</sup> Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981):559-601

<sup>82</sup> Ann Douglas, “Heaven Our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States, 1830-1880” in David Stannard, ed. *Death in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1975)

a movement like professionalization, so the perpetual human limit came for that same mentality to be an embarrassing challenge. It needed to be sentimentalized and thereby imaginatively stripped of its power.

As with notions of professionalization, these cultural practices regarding death did find a receptive audience in the New South—in the larger towns and cities, among whites and blacks. Studying the rise of a funeral industry in the New South, marked by such things as the professionalization of the funeral director, trade associations and a periodical (*Southern Funeral Director*), funeral “homes” and mass-produced fans to advertise them, Charles Reagan Wilson argued that the New South era, especially the 1920s, marked a “triumph of the American way of death,” the phrase that Jessica Mitford coined to describe the new practices that embodied the new mentality.<sup>83</sup> However, examining country music as a cultural practice of the white, rural-based working class, Wilson found something very different, the “starkness of the southern rural past,” “an almost medieval awareness of death, a memento mori tradition” at odds with both the dominant regional and Western “denial” of death.<sup>84</sup> Wilson’s point can be pushed further, back from the commercial country songs in the period 1930-1980 that form the basis of his essay, and into the rural New South, where both white and black Protestants sang of death as the foreboding limit, the revealer of how precarious life was, the awful leveler whose ominous reality dramatized God’s power and human beings’ impotence.

“There’s a man goin’ round takin’ names,” one folk song that circulated among blacks and whites from South Carolina to the Ozarks warned, “there’s a man goin’ round takin’ names/ he has taken my father’s name/ and has put my heart to shame/ there’s a man goin’ round takin’

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<sup>83</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “The Southern Funeral Director: Managing Death in the New South” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 67 (Spring 1983):49-69; Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963)

<sup>84</sup> Wilson, “Digging Up Bones: Death in Country Music” in Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie* 97

names/ he has taken my sister's name/ and has put my heart to shame." Successive stanzas named mother, brother, and other kin, until the terror of death stared the singer in the face.<sup>85</sup> In another song death was not a personified name-taker but an ominous train that arrived with a schedule that could not be known. Collectors found this song among blacks and whites in Kentucky, North Carolina, and Texas. "There's a little black train a comin/ get all your business right/ there's a little black train a-comin/ an it may be here tonight/ oh, the little black train is a-comin/ I know it's goin to slack/ you can tell it by its rumblin/ it's all draped in black/...O Death, why don't you spare me?/ I seen my wicked plight/ have mercy, Lord, to hear me/ come and set me right/ oh, death had fixed the shackles/ around his throat so tight/ before he got his business fixed/ the train rolled in that night."<sup>86</sup> The train, unlike the newer automobile, did not allow people the freedom of control; they had to wait for its arrival, and the uncertain time of the black train's arrival made that waiting all the more anxious. "Sinner, Don't Let This Harvest Pass," a song in the black tradition, drew on older agrarian imagery of a specified time of season, but used the accelerated labor demands of that time to convey a similar anxious sense of foreboding: "sinner, don't you let this harvest pass/ sinner, don't you let this harvest pass/ sinner, don't you let this harvest pass/ and die and go to hell at last/ there ain't but one thing I done wrong/ I stayed in the wilderness a day too long." This wilderness was not that of the *via negativa* where the lonely soul sought God (chapter 5), but rather a wilderness of sin with a danger of being forever lost.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Vance Randolph, *Ozark Folk-Songs Volume 4* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1980):38 [white, Ozarks, 1921]; Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* 447 [black, South Carolina, c1930]; Robert Halli, ed. *An Alabama Songbook* 241 [black, Alabama, 1945] Randolph and Sandburg suggest that the song goes back to the 1890s or before.

<sup>86</sup> Dorothy Scarborough, *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1925):260-261 [black, Texas, early 1920s]; Newman I. White, *American Negro Folk-Songs* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1928):65 [black, North Carolina, 1925]; Mary Allen Grissom, *The Negro Sings a New Heaven* 11 [black, Kentucky]; John Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Our Singing Country* 46-47 [white, Kentucky, 1937]

<sup>87</sup> Halli, ed. *Alabama Songbook* 218 [black, Alabama, 1947]



A number of songs that seem to have circulated primarily among blacks presented death in chilling immediacy. “Soon one morning, death come creepin in my room/ soon one morning, death come creepin in my room,” one song heard in Alabama, North Carolina, Mississippi, and Kentucky chanted ominously, “soon one morning death come creepin in my room/ o my Lord, o my Lord, what shall I do to be saved?/ death done been here, took my mother and gone/ o my Lord, o my Lord, what shall I do to be saved?/ death done been here, left me a motherless child/ o my Lord, o my Lord, what shall I do to be saved?”<sup>88</sup> A similar song heard in Mississippi and Alabama sang urgently: “oh, the hearse keep a rollin somebody to the graveyard/ oh, the hearse keep a rollin somebody to the graveyard/ oh the hearse keep a-rollin somebody to the graveyard/ o Lord, I feel like my time ain’t long.”<sup>89</sup> Professional songsters Charley Patton of Mississippi and Blind Lemon Jefferson of Texas—both children of rural Baptist churches and pioneers of the blues—drew on images in this *memento mori* tradition to craft their own compositions, Patton in his “Prayer of Death (Parts 1 and 2)” and Jefferson in his “All I Want is That Pure Religion.” Patton began “Prayer of Death” with a dark summons to “tone the bell,” and then sang of the urgent need to “hold to God’s unchanging hand” in a world where the bonds of life could break at any moment. Jefferson accentuated the unpredictability of death by starkly narrating the death of a child in the first person tense. “Well, death is ridin all through the land, hallelu/ death is ridin all through the land, ain’t gonna spare no gambling man/ well, the doctor’s standin, lookin sad, hallelu/ doctor’s standin, lookin sad, hardest case I ever had/ then you gonna need that pure religion, hallelu, hallelu/ well, my mother and father round my bed a cryin, yes, hallelu/ mother and father round my bed cryin, Lord have mercy my child is dyin/ well, the train is comin, done

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<sup>88</sup> White, *American Negro Folk-Songs* 78-79 [North Carolina, 1925]; Grissom, *Negro Sings a New Heaven* 9 [late 20s, Kentucky]; *Screamin and Hollerin the Blues* (Charley Patton and Bertha Lee) [Mississippi, 1934]; Lomax and Lomax, *Our Singing Country* 30 [Alabama, 1937]

<sup>89</sup> *Screamin and Hollerin the Blues* (Delta Big Four) [Mississippi, 1930]; *Screamin and Hollerin the Blues* (Charley Patton and Bertha Lee) [Mississippi, 1934]; Lomax and Lomax, *Our Singing Country* 31 [Alabama, 1937]

turned the curve, hallelu/ train is comin, done turned the curve, fixin to leave this sinful world/ ride on, Death, don ride so slow, hallelu/ ride on, Death, don ride so slow, for I'm willin, ready to go."<sup>90</sup> That parents would surround the deathbed of their child was "unnatural," but then the world was not "nature"—explicable and controllable through the rationality of science—but an arena pervaded by mystery. Even the train, that modern invention that inspired the establishment of regularized, national time zones in the 1880s, became in folk song an image of events that came to pass through an unknowable schedule.

Death's unpredictability put in stark relief just how tenuous life was, how great was the human dependency on God. A number of songs used the awful solitude of the point of death to dramatize a sense of life as marked by severe limitation. One song in the black tradition, heard in Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama, imagined life at the point of death as a prison, from which one had to depend on Jesus for freedom: "you gonna need somebody on your bond/ you gonna need somebody on your bond/ when the room gets dark, when death comes creepin' down/ you gonna need somebody on your bond/ well, I got King Jesus on my bond/ when the room gets dark, when death comes creepin' down/ well, I got King Jesus on my bond."<sup>91</sup> A white Georgia farm laborer, talking to Robert Coles in the late fifties or early sixties, articulated the same sense with uncanny similarities. "We're all in prison, all the time," he said, "we're sinners—here by the grace of God. This life is our one and only chance, our last chance, *the* chance God has given us. When we die, we either stay in prison, or we're sprung. No one knows who goes where, only God does. You can't get to Him with money. You can't get to Him by telling him you're Mr. Big, and you have more money than anyone can count in the Citizens and Southern Bank. You can't get to Him by saying you've got all the education there is, and all the respect of everyone in

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<sup>90</sup> Blind Lemon Jefferson, "All I Want is That Pure Religion" [1926] *Goodbye, Babylon* Dust-to-Digital, 2003

<sup>91</sup> *Screamin and Hollerin the Blues* (Charley Patton) [Mississippi, 1929]; Blind Willie Johnson [Texas, 1929]; Halli, ed. *Alabama Songbook* 234 [Alabama, 1947]

the world...”<sup>92</sup> As for this Georgia man death was the leveler that starkly revealed human dependency, so another song in the black tradition depicted Jesus as the nurse who cared for the deceased’s body as a metaphor for human receptivity. Heard in Texas, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, and Kentucky, this song spoke to disconsolate kin and sought to assure them that the dead were taken care of. “Well, don’t you be uneasy/ well, don’t you be uneasy/ well, don’t you be uneasy/ Jesus goin to make up my dying bed/ when you see me dyin/ I don’t want nobody to cry/ but all I want you to do for me/ is to close my dyin eye/ well I’ll be sleepin in Jesus/ Jesus goin to make up my dying bed/ all I want you to do for me/ just give that bell a tone.”<sup>93</sup> But, as in the prose admonitions of the Georgia farm laborer, the Christian’s disposition was one of trusting in a caring Jesus, not indulging in self-confidence.

A song that originated among white miners in eastern Kentucky drew on the darkness of the coal mines to warn the Christian to carefully and continually maintain trust. Here Jesus was the light on the miner’s helmet: “when the sun of your life has gone down/ and the clouds in the west turn to gold/ endless night then to you will have come/ when the light has gone out of your soul/ o just think how in death you would feel/ with the light growing dim in your soul/ o how lonely and sad it will be/ if the light has gone out of your soul/ I want to live for God while I’m here/ [*lyric unclear*] by Jesus’ control/ when I come to the end of the way/ I’ll have the light burning bright in my soul.”<sup>94</sup> A gospel composition that rural people appropriated, “Life’s Evening Sun in Sinking Low,” became rather closely tied to rural work patterns of sunup to sundown. A.J. Henson recalls that his father, song leader at the Baptist church in the Dyess

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<sup>92</sup> Robert Coles, *Flannery O’Connor’s South* 62

<sup>93</sup> Blind Willie Johnson [Texas, 1927]; *Screamin and Hollerin the Blues* (Charley Patton) [Mississippi, 1929]; Grissom, *Negro Sings a New Heaven* 5 [Kentucky, late 20s]; Lydia Parrish, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (New York: Creative Age, 1942):178-179 [Georgia, 20s-30s]; Halli, ed. *Alabama Songbook* 237-238[Alabama, 1947]

<sup>94</sup> Tilman Cadle, Archive of Folk Culture AFS 2017B [Kentucky, 1938]

Colony, sang “all the time,” and that this song was one of his favorites.<sup>95</sup> It also came to have a special place for the Cash family. In his 1997 memoir, Johnny Cash recalled everyday labor in the cotton fields and the pervasive presence of song: “as the sun got about halfway down toward the west and our spirits started flagging, we’d switch to gospel: first the rousing, up-tempo songs to keep us going, then, as the sun began to set, the slower spirituals. After Jack died, we’d sing all the songs we sang at his funeral. We closed each day in the fields with ‘Life’s Evening Sun is Sinking Low.’”<sup>96</sup> The ritualized context of the singing indicates that it became a very personalized *memento mori* for the family: “life’s evening sun is sinking low/ a few more days and I must go/ to meet the deeds that I have done/ where there will be no setting sun...” Life was tenuous, death opened the door to judgment, and one needed to be ready. In a similar manner, “Wouldn’t Mind Dying,” a song in black and white traditions, heard in Texas, Tennessee, Alabama, and Virginia, evoked death to cast an insecure aura over life. “By and by, Lord, I’m goin to see the King/ by and by, I’m goin to see the King/ by and by, I’m goin to see the King/ Lord, I wouldn’t mind dying if dying was all/ after death we’re gonna have to stand a test/ after death we’re gonna have to stand a test/ after death we’re gonna have to stand a test/ well I wouldn’t mind dying if dying was all.”<sup>97</sup>

On hillbilly radio, through the mediation of the Carter Family, a young J.R. Cash likely heard this song, as well as the most famous and perhaps widespread of the rural *memento mori* songs, “Conversation with Death,” also know as “O Death.”<sup>98</sup> Carl Lindahl and Todd Harvey

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<sup>95</sup> Author interview with A.J. Henson, January 9, 2006. Goldie Dallas, whose husband Calvin’s father sang in the Baptist church of Dyess, and occasionally with a local gospel quartet, also recalls his regular singing in the fields. Author interview with Goldie Dallas, January 10, 2006.

<sup>96</sup> Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 71.

<sup>97</sup> *Key to the Kingdom* (Blind Mamie and A.C. Forehand) [Tennessee, 1927]; Blind Willie Johnson [Texas, 1929]; *The Carter Family 1927-1934* [Virginia, 1932]; Halli, ed. *Alabama Songbook* 242 [Alabama, 1947]

<sup>98</sup> Cash continually reiterated the influence of the Carter Family on his youthful imagination, before the “new” Carter Family became part of his touring troupe in 1962, before he married into the family in 1968. A.J. Henson and J.E. Huff corroborate the popularity of the Carter Family in Dyess. (Author interviews, January 9-10, 2006). The

have demonstrated that the song was primarily the creation of Lloyd Chandler, a farmer and preacher in Madison County, North Carolina.<sup>99</sup> A partial cripple, a notorious alcoholic and violent showman in his youth, a poor man who broke into the railroad depot to distribute government grain to the truly needy poor in the hard years of the 20s, a preserver of old ballads who sang for Cecil Sharp in 1916, a tireless “untrained” preacher who traveled hundreds of miles to sing and evangelize from his 1922 call until his death in the late 1970s, Chandler cast a wide wake and left a powerful impression on many people. But it was his a cappella singing of “Conversation with Death” that left the most indelible imprint. Chandler traveled into Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, typically performing his song in rural churches—both white and black. Lindahl describes an emblematic scene, based on recollections of some thirty people who heard Chandler: “as Lloyd’s voice swells against the crowded walls and the ears of the congregants, chills come instantaneously and en masse. One listener needs to be somewhere else as soon as he can get there. With the church doors blocked by the overflow congregation, he finds his way to a side-aisle window and jumps out, falling six feet to a place where there is finally enough peace to muffle the terror of the song.”<sup>100</sup> Terror is the overwhelming sentiment evoked by Lindahl’s interviewees, even by relatives of Chandler who knew him as an unusually warm man and a special friend to children. For Chandler sang not about himself, but rather pushed his hearers to reflect on their own inescapable limit and the fragile, precarious nature of their own life. Like the rural preachers whose denials of agency

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Carters recorded “Wouldn’t Mind Dying” in 1932 and “O Death” in 1938. Two of Cash’s own late compositions (“The Man Comes Around” c2002 and “Like the 309” c2003) draw on lyrics and imagery from “Man ‘Goin Round” and “Little Black Train A Comin’,” respectively. It is possible that Cash only came to know these latter two songs as an adult, through the mediation of field or commercial recordings. It is also possible that he heard them as a boy in Dyess.

<sup>99</sup> Carl Lindahl, “Thrills and Miracles: Legends of Lloyd Chandler” 133-161; Todd Harvey, folklife specialist at Archive of Folk Culture, conversation with author, October 2005

<sup>100</sup> Lindahl 135

pointed to the mystery of God, so death the revelator showed the stark limit of human life and the immediacy of the need for God.

Oh what is this I cannot see  
With icy hands gets a hold on me  
Oh I am Death, none can excel  
I open the doors of heaven and hell  
O Death, O Death how can it be  
I'm unprepared for eternity  
Yes, I have come for to get your soul  
To drop the flesh from off your frame  
The earth and worm both have their claim  
O Death, O Death if this be true  
Please give me time to reason with you  
From time to time you heard and saw  
I'll close your eyes, I'll lock your jaw  
I'll lock your jaw so you can't talk  
I'll close your eyes so you can't see  
This very hour come and go with me  
O Death, O Death consider my age  
And do not take me at this stage  
My wealth is all at your command  
If you will move your icy hand  
The old, the young, the rich, the poor  
Alike with me will have to go  
No age, no wealth, no silver nor gold  
Nothing satisfies me but your poor soul  
O Death, O Death please let me see  
If Christ has turned his back on me  
When you were called and asked to bow  
You wouldn't take heed and it's too late now  
O Death, O Death please give me time  
To fix my heart and change my mind  
Your heart is fixed, your mind is bound  
I have that shackles to drag you down  
Too late, too late, to all farewell  
Your soul is doomed, you're summoned to hell  
As long as God in heaven shall dwell  
Your soul your soul shall scream in hell<sup>101</sup>

Chandler told various close relatives that the song itself came to him in his conversion vision in 1916, as he lay drunk in a remote barn (chapter 5). As with the vision in the call to preach

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<sup>101</sup> Lloyd Chandler, "Conversation with Death" *Journal of Folklore Research* 41:2/3 (May-December 2004):125-126

stories, describing the song's source in this way made a theological point: that not even the terror of the limit of death was his own insight, but rather came to him unawares.

A variant of this song, with the signal phrase "spare me over for another year" and a shift from first to third person, circulated in areas with significant black populations (unlike Chandler's western North Carolina). Black singers Vera Hall and Dock Reed sang it in Sumter County, Alabama, and white musicians Sarah Ogan Gunning and Dock Boggs (from the less lily-white coal country of eastern Kentucky and extreme western Virginia) recorded it in the 1960s as an old song they had learned in their youth.<sup>102</sup> It has been argued, for example by editor Robert Halli in the recently published *Alabama Songbook*, that the song expresses a "negative and earthly view of death," one that is "very unusual in spirituals" and seemingly incongruous with a mentality that is assumed to regard death as a welcome and desirable gateway to heaven.<sup>103</sup> It is true that in rural Protestantism death was a final release from the prison of the Devil-assaulted soul (chapter 4), but many of these songs, not just "O Death," are also marked by a deep anxiety about that final moment; longing for Heaven's release was dialectically balanced with dread of facing God the Judge. This anxiety exaggerated the innumerable moments of life, because any one could be the moment of death, and death brought God's ultimate assessment. Anderson Johnson, born in 1916 into a black sharecropping family in the Virginia Piedmont, traveled widely like Lloyd Chandler and sang this variant in his own preaching.

Please, Death  
Please, Death in the morning  
Please, Death  
Well, spare me a little longer, just another year...  
Mother ran away screamin and crying  
Death and the child stood alone  
I heard the Death sayin' to the child  
"Look at here, Death, at what you're doing to me

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<sup>102</sup> Ralph Stanley sang Boggs' version in *O Brother Where Art Thou* and won a Grammy for it in 2002.

<sup>103</sup> Halli, ed. *Alabama Songbook* 239

You're fixin my eyes so I can't see  
Chewed my tongue where I can't talk  
Fixed my feet where I can't walk..."  
I heard Death sayin' to the child  
"I know your number  
Seen your days pass and gone  
You had your chance  
You heard God's people out singin and prayin  
You wouldn't hear, you walked away  
You wouldn't give a hands  
You wouldn't bend your knees  
Now, you've got to come and go with me"  
And that's the true vision of all of us one day, my friends<sup>104</sup>

That vision was certainly stark, but it was not fatalistic. Wilson's phrase—*memento mori*—is much more precise and descriptive. That older Christian tradition, stretching far back into the medieval era and emblematically pictured by an ominous, ever-present skull—taught a continual remembrance of death, that human beings were mortal and that life knew an inherent limit. This sense was not the preserve of a certain class, and a painting like Hans Holbein's *The French Ambassadors* (1533) shows that fashionable, cosmopolitan men of the world, surrounded by instruments of early empire-making, displayed also the remembrance of their mortality. In this light, the songs of rural Protestants were not messages of predetermined despair, but rather confessions of the precarious nature of life and the pressing need for dependence in God.

Two iconic figures that emerged out of this rural world, Robert Johnson of Mississippi and Hank Williams of Alabama, drew on the *memento mori* tradition of rural Protestantism in crafting their own dark songs. Their deviations from this tradition, and their renewed contemporary popularity, are helpful in clarifying its complicated nature. Recorded in the mid-30s by Don Law of Columbia (later to be Cash's producer from 1958-67), Johnson sang of forces outside his control that were already overtaking him. In "Preachin' Blues" he sang, "the blues is a lowdown shakin' chill/ you ain't never had them, I hope you never will/ well, the

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<sup>104</sup> Rev. Anderson Johnson, "Death in the Morning" [1953] *Goodbye, Babylon* Dust-to-Digital



blues, is a aching old heart disease/ like consumption, killin me by degrees.” Unnatural events conveyed a sense of impending demise in “Crossroad Blues:” “standin at the crossroad, babe/ risin sun goin down/ standin at the crossroad/ risin sun goin down/ I believe to my soul now/ poor Bob is sinkin down.” “Hellhound on My Trail” spoke of an awful chase: “I gotta keep movin/ blues fallin down like hail/ and the days keeps worryin me/ there’s a hellhound on my trail.” But the road ahead was ominous too: “I got stones in my passway/ and all my roads seem dark at night/ I have pains in my heart/ they have taken my appetite.”<sup>105</sup> Hank Williams conjured up a similar sense of doom in a number of songs he wrote in the late 40s and early 50s. “Alone and Forsaken” took the pain of a break-up into a deeper sense of abandonment: “the darkness is falling, the sky has turned gray/ a hound in the distance is starting to bay/ I wonder, I wonder, what she’s thinking of/ forsaken, forgotten, without any love.” In “Lonely Tombs” the narrator strolled in a graveyard. “Every voice from the tomb seemed to whisper and say/ livin man you must soon follow me/ and I thought as I gazed, on that cold marble slab/ what a sad lonesome place that must be.” “The Angel of Death” asked ominously, “when the lights all grow dim and the dark shadows creep/ and then your loved ones are gathered to weep/ can you face them and say with your dying breath/ that you’re ready to meet the angel of death?” Williams could certainly evoke feelings of doom, but in “I’ll Never Get Out of This World Alive” he presented a mordantly sardonic take on mortality: “everything’s against me and it’s got me down/ if I jumped in the river I would probably drown/ no matter how I struggle and strive/ I’ll never get out of this world alive.”<sup>106</sup>

This song was playing on hillbilly radio when Williams died in January 1953 at the age of twenty-nine, in the back seat of a car en route to a show in Ohio. Johnson was twenty-seven

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<sup>105</sup> *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* Columbia/Legacy, 1990

<sup>106</sup> *The Complete Hank Williams*

when he died in 1938, after unwittingly drinking poison at a rough juke joint in the Mississippi Delta. Beginning in 1990 with Columbia's *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* boxed-set, through 1997 when Lost Highway Records began to re-package and market Williams' material, both musicians have enjoyed a wide and renewed popularity. Their rough, unstable lives and early deaths give a sense of gritty authenticity to their ominous lyrics. And both singers, for this new audience, are essentially fatalistic figures, people who sang with a sense of impending doom and seemed to know that they were bound to die young.<sup>107</sup> Though both emerged out of the rural New South, their fatalism offers a helpful contrast with the *memento mori* tradition. The rural Protestant songs of death accentuated human limitation and ignorance, but these, like the rural preacher's mystical call and pleas of insufficiency, were used to point to God. Death unmasked human pretensions to security and confidence and showed that the humble soul could never escape this basic mystery: only God ruled over death. The fatalistic sense, by contrast, is anthropocentric in the sense that what appears to be the final human limit is in fact the end. While the blues, a hellhound, loneliness and the like may strike one with a kind mysterious fated quality, in death there is no mystery: one knows, darkly and ominously, that it is final.

Historians using source materials from the New South bourgeoisie, white or black, have not been struck by a stark awareness of death or a pervasive sense of limit. The hymnbooks and song collections that bore the denominations' stamp contain songs that parallel what Wilson found in the rise of the funeral industry: a management of death.<sup>108</sup> In the case of the songs, it is primarily through sentimentalization. A few of the old dark camp meeting songs do appear, but

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<sup>107</sup> Williams' entire repertoire, unlike Johnson's, contains numerous gospel songs that speak of Christian hope and God's power. These songs are hardly in the forefront in the recent CD re-issues, and the continuing interest in the story of Williams' death—alone and forsaken on a cold winter night—tends to override the Christian element in Williams' music and, perhaps, own life.

<sup>108</sup> More generally, Paul Harvey argues that regulation of what was sung in church—through new music training programs in the seminaries, the new position of minister of music, and publication and circulation of official denominational hymnals—was a significant part of bourgeois Protestants' campaign for respectability. See Harvey, *Redeeming the South* 97-102, 130-132

what George Jackson found in his careful comparison of hymnbooks over time was the rule. Examining the 1905 white Methodist hymnal, he found that “among the other cut-outs were such doleful poems as ‘Dark was the night,’ ‘Thou art gone to the grave,’ and ‘Hark, from the tombs.’ The atmosphere was becoming lighter in Methodist circles.”<sup>109</sup> My own analysis of books published by the leading white and black denominations finds none of the *memento mori* songs, but instead a sentimental tone that Sandra Sizer found in her examination of the Moody-Sankey gospel hymns of the 1870s and 1880s and epitomized in Fanny Crosby’s 1911 composition “Jesus is Calling:” “Jesus is tenderly calling thee home/ calling today, calling today/ why from the sunshine of love wilt thou roam/...Jesus is pleading; O list to His voice/ hear him today, hear him today/ they who believe on His name shall rejoice/ quickly arise and away.”<sup>110</sup> This does not mean that songs of a light and sentimental tone, especially the gospel hymns being composed by legions of regional and national songwriters in the early twentieth century, never made their way into the churches of the rural poor. They could do this because rural Protestants were not gloomy fatalists; their stark awareness of death was balanced dialectically with confident hope in God’s power. On the other side of the haunted sense of human limit was the mystery of God.

As with the figure of the called preacher, there is a temptation for the historian to reduce the body of *memento mori* songs to simply a socioeconomic mirror, not an act of cultural creativity—to timepieces that simply reiterated the fact of unpredictable death, like that of Ettaleen Carter or Jack Cash. Rural people did live in a world that contained significant unpredictability and a demoralizing lack of control. As they did with their sense of perpetual trouble (chapter 4), so in articulating a sense of mystery and limit they confronted basic

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<sup>109</sup> George Jackson, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* 308

<sup>110</sup> I examined the Southern Baptist Convention’s 1926 hymnal, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South’s 1905 and 1930 books, and the National Baptist Convention’s 1921 collection. For an analysis of the Moody-Sankey gospel songs, see Sandra Sizer, *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion*.

phenomena in their lives. Carter Family biographer Mark Zwonitzer offers this analysis of the Carters' song "Worried Man Blues," their best seller of 1930:

In "Worried Man Blues," a man goes across the river to sleep, wakes up a prisoner in chains, and has no idea what he's done wrong. That song spoke a simple unjustifiable truth: Some men were born to the poor and lonesome class in America, and despite the national promise, that class was hard to escape. Even if somebody did, the hellhounds stayed on his trail. Having come up in Poor Valley, A.P. had to know deep down his own good fortune could vaporize, and without reason. If life in Poor Valley taught him anything, it taught him that truth.<sup>111</sup>

Zwonitzer is both perceptive and, it seems to me, only partially right; this is essentially a fatalistic read on the sensibility evoked by the Carters.

That rural people of the New South lived in a world of severe limits, prey to forces outside their control, is not news to the historian. That in their own religious culture, they may have both articulated their feeling of limit *and* pointed to a way beyond it, is a new idea. There was a paradoxically freeing dimension to the recurrent teachings of finitude and impotence: at the border of human knowledge and power was a realm of mystery where God dwelled, unpredictable and unfathomable. Folklorist Carl Lindahl, in his interpretation of the power of Lloyd Chandler's "Conversation with Death," makes a careful judgment that may be extended into the lives of rural Protestants. "In a world that daily presents altogether too many reasons to be afraid," he writes, "Lloyd and his eulogizers have worked overtime to make the terror of damnation stand out, so that their witnesses and listeners would invoke a fear of imagination even greater and more palpable than the constant and intense fears regularly experienced in the course of their lives."<sup>112</sup> Or, as A.P. Carter strangely admonished his reader in an evangelistic

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<sup>111</sup> Mark Zwonitzer with Charles Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone* 138

<sup>112</sup> Carl Lindahl, "Thrills and Miracles" 143

pamphlet that he wrote, had printed, and began to circulate in the late 40s, “Where art thou? It is not all of life to live, nor all of death to die.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> A.P. Carter, *Bible Questions and Answers* (unknown place and publisher, c1948):1

## CHAPTER 7

### ORALITY AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

*1935, Indianola, Mississippi*—Yale professor John Dollard and his research assistant Helen Watson crept into the back of a church as the congregation’s song filled the building. The singers were black tenants and sharecroppers on the large plantations of Sunflower County, and this evening meeting was one of several in the midst of a revival. Soon the singing died down and the sermon began. The preacher read a doleful text—“the joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning”—and then told the story of Noah, a “just man” whom God isolated and singled out for rescue in the midst of colossal destruction. Everyone around him was caught up in the patterns that sustained life and celebrated it, marrying and dancing, but Noah withdrew from these customs and dedicated himself to heeding God’s special command to build an ark. Noah worked and worked, and finally the ark was finished. Then it began to rain furiously, and the waters began to rise. Noah called the “beasties” of the earth to be with him, and then went by himself into the ark, even as all the people around took no notice of the rising waters and continued marrying and dancing. When the waters rose to the third story, Dollard wrote of the story, “God himself locked the door to the Ark and pinned down the windows. People began falling off the housetops, mothers with their children in their arms crying out for Noah to save them. The water got so deep that people were hanging on the tree tops and one by one being hurled into the water, all hollering for help from Noah, as long as they could holler at

all. But Noah could not help them because God had locked the door and taken the key and pinned down the windows...”<sup>1</sup>

This was an eerily violent scene, certainly all the more so because the congregation surely had vivid memories of the great 1927 flood. Sunflower county native and sometime resident Charley Patton evoked the terror of the flood in his 1929 masterpiece “High Water Everywhere,” in phrases uncannily close to the preacher’s. In narrating his own story of doom, the preacher took free license with the text of Genesis 6-8. Noah was utterly alone in the sermon, not surrounded by wife and sons and daughters as in the text, and God pinning down the windows even as mothers cried out were dramatic features original to the sermon. Dollard was struck by the power of the sermon, and stayed to talk to the preacher after the long service was over. Dollard wrote that he “found him to be a tenant on a plantation some miles away, a typical lower-class Negro worker. His control of English, of course, was nothing like perfect, although it was germane and powerful. I marveled that he could have invented such a sermon and suspected that possibly he had learned the main organization of it from someone else.”<sup>2</sup>

What Dollard encountered, with confusion and condescension, was a vibrant and developed oral culture. The previous chapters (4-6) have used the forms of anecdotes, stories, sermons, and songs to reconstruct the basic themes in rural Protestantism. This chapter looks reflectively at the world these forms inhabited, a culture that did have a few written texts (the Bible and song collections), but that was predominantly *oral*. “Farm tenants and wage hands do not participate in community affairs,” Arthur Raper alleged in the 1937 Commission on Interracial Cooperation report *The South’s Landless Farmers*. “They are the *inarticulate* [my emphasis] benefactors or victims of the public policy or private practices of those who control

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<sup>1</sup> John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* 227 I have changed Dollard’s spelling of “Norah” and “Nark” because its use of condescending dialect detracts from the story in the sermon.

<sup>2</sup> Dollard 230

the religious, educational, political, and economic life of the community.”<sup>3</sup> This chapter challenges this notion, and argues that in their religion the rural poor were quite articulate, even if the liberals of the CIC did not seem to hear them. Two major studies of people from the rural South—Bruce Rosenberg’s 1970 *The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (revised in 1988 as *Can These Bones Live?*) and Jeff Todd Titon’s 1988 *Powerhouse for God: Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church*—have analyzed and portrayed a sophisticated oral religious culture, a culture that, in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s is a survival from an earlier era.<sup>4</sup> This chapter begins with Rosenberg and Titon’s premise, rather than with that of the CIC, and seeks to move back from more recent survivals into the New South era when an articulate, oral culture was flourishing.

The chapter argues that the orality of rural people’s religion had a dialectical effect: it preserved the past and made it a living force, bringing the narratives of the Bible to bear on the very concrete present (contrary to the established trope that the rural poor’s “otherworldly” old-time religion was inept at speaking to their present lives). In this oral culture, preachers and songsters made the Bible come alive; their stories drew people in by making the text a living narrative in which past and present fused rather easily. The oral culture was *not* “fundamentalist.” that frequent appellation is a severe imaginative roadblock to making sense of a culture that took free license with biblical stories and was not abstractly self-reflective about the nature of the Bible. In the oral culture where past and present spilled over into one another, the rural poor of the New South found the imaginative space to accentuate the democratic

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<sup>3</sup> Commission on Interracial Cooperation, *The South’s Landless Farmers* n.p.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Rosenberg, *Can These Bones Live? The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988); Jeff Todd Titon, *Powerhouse for God: Speech, Chant, and Song in an Appalachian Baptist Church* (Austin: University of Texas, 1988)



undercurrents in the Bible, thereby developing a sense of identity at odds with and in critique of dominant valuations in the culture of the New South (described in chapter 3).

Dollard was not alone in his outsider's sense of wonder at what people with minimal formal education could do within an oral culture revolving around a single written text. Peripatetic folklorist John Lomax wrote with admiration of "the picturesque imagery and poetic phrasing found among the humblest Negro congregation of the backwoods," and concluded his 1947 memoir with an admonition in defense of oral folk culture: "I'd like to protest again to the educated and the semi-educated Negroes of the South. Almost universally they opposed my project of collecting the folk lore and folk songs on the ground that 'we have got beyond that.'"<sup>5</sup> "I am convinced that the simple genius and the native art that characterize the American Negro's folk-religion place it in a position of importance as a genuine art form," John Henry Faulk wrote in opening his 1940 collection of rural black sermons from central and east Texas. "The Negro preacher became the poet and the singer who gave voice to his people's religion," Faulk continued. "He was often unable to read. He was often in poverty. But he was always eloquent, and he was always convincing. His sermons...were invariably infused with his creative genius."<sup>6</sup> Of the illiterate black tenant preachers he met in Gee's Bend, Alabama in the late 30s, Tuskegee graduate student Nathaniel Colley noted that "their memories...seem to be uncannily developed."<sup>7</sup> Presbyterian evangelist R.P. Smith recalled his work with white mountaineers in western North Carolina in the first three decades of the century. "I have heard them deliver some wonderful sermons which held their hearers spellbound," he wrote of the preachers, and recalled one elderly widow who gave him room and board for the night in a remote cove. "She questioned me thoroughly on several portions of the Scriptures," he wrote of the tables being

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<sup>5</sup> John Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* 299

<sup>6</sup> John Henry Faulk, *Quickened by De Spirit: Ten Negro Sermons* 1-2

<sup>7</sup> Nathaniel Colley, "Exploratory Study" 9

turned, and “it was indeed surprising to find such a wonderful Christian living in obscurity.”<sup>8</sup> “A large proportion of the mountaineers read their Bibles,” a Baptist evangelist concurred in 1911, and “however poorly developed they may be in Christian service, the contents of the Book to these people are held in reverence.”<sup>9</sup> Lloyd Chandler, composer of “Conversation with Death,” was one of these. “He had a remembrance,” his son Garrett recalls, “he would take the Bible—he wasn’t no educated man—but he read it through twelve times and studied it, and he could quote it without a book. Anywhere. It didn’t make no difference. He had that kind of remembrance.”<sup>10</sup>

White tenant Frank Tenge in Hale County, Alabama was in many ways one of the victims that Raper described. Tenge suffered from various things outside his control, but on Sundays he donned spectacles, stood up in front of his rural neighbors, and read the Bible to them at church. His illiterate friend George Gudger had few possessions, but prominently displayed on the mantel in a room of his shack was a Bible his wife gave him and read to him.<sup>11</sup> Ned Cobb, the remarkable illiterate Macon County, Alabama storyteller that Theodore Rosengarten talked to in the late 1960s, remembered the few possessions he bought as a young man and still had in old age: three plows, a cook stove, a dining safe, a rubber tire buggy, mule bridles, a sewing machine, a record player, and a Bible, “only now [late 1960s] beginning to get frail.”<sup>12</sup> On St. Helena Island, South Carolina, in the teens and 20s, “the Bible heroes live in the imagination of the people like the great oak on the road to Coffins Point,” teacher Rossa Cooley noted. “Here as in few of our cities today can a speaker have confidence that every biblical allusion will be caught by his hearers,” and “this is so because the Bible for years was the one

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<sup>8</sup> R.P. Smith, *Experiences in Mountain Mission Work* 17-19

<sup>9</sup> *Our Home Field* 3/11

<sup>10</sup> Carl Lindahl, ed. *American Folktales from the Collections of the Library of Congress* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004):442

<sup>11</sup> James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* 260-261, 161

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* 170-171

book in the island homes.”<sup>13</sup> It was also, people that grew up in the Dyess Colony recall, one of the few books that their own families possessed, and Johnny Cash’s own public memories of his brother Jack’s fervent nightly Bible study (see chapter 6) indicate its critical importance in the Cash household.<sup>14</sup> Among white tenants in Robeson County, North Carolina, another Baptist missionary captured the give-and-take of the oral culture and its one book—“they revere the Bible, even where they can not read it”—while a seminary-educated minister in Oglethorpe County, Georgia confessed that rural people were astute listeners: “country people...are as careful in the brand of their preaching, as they are in the choice of their special brand of tobacco. They simply know when a man can preach the truth.”<sup>15</sup> Of this well-developed ability to listen and also to store things in memory, Jim Garland wrote of his youth in eastern Kentucky in the 20s and 30s that “those of my father’s generation who could not read or write often knew entire passages from the Bible by heart because they had heard passages read and discussed so often...The Bible, the only book in many mountain homes, became part of a young boy’s store of knowledge.”<sup>16</sup>

These reflective ruminations about the forms of an oral culture indicate what the previous chapters already have in their study of content: that the rural poor of the New South had a religious culture of their own, perpetuated and sustained primarily through hearing and speaking, with reading centered around a single book, the Bible. A close reading of sermons from the rural South, either recorded or transcribed, offers a microcosmic way to explore more deeply how an oral culture appropriated its lone text. Sermons were the centerpiece of the rural church service. In some sense this was generically true of any Protestant church, but as town and city churches

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<sup>13</sup> Rossa Cooley, *School Acres: An Adventure in Rural Education* (New Haven: Yale University, 1930):135

<sup>14</sup> Author interviews with A.J. Henson and J.E. Huff, January 9-10, 2006

<sup>15</sup> *Our Home Field* 10/11, 5/13

<sup>16</sup> Julia Ardery, ed. *Welcome the Traveler Home* 29

moved in the late nineteenth century toward programs of community uplift, the sermon became less the absolute focus. Indeed, as chapter 4 argued, denominational reformers consistently criticized rural churches for their sermon-centered ritual. “The primitive and pioneer notion that preaching is church and church is preaching persists,” white Baptist leader J.W. Jent charged in 1924, and Tuskegee chaplain Harry Richardson lamented in 1947 that “poor as it is, the rural sermon is the community’s only regular injunction to higher living.”<sup>17</sup> Focusing on sermons should not suggest, however, that religion is simply something that ministers do. This is a long-established trope in the historiography of religion and one that still has some currency, but as the previous chapters have sought to show, “ordinary” people—the “laity”—were hardly inarticulate or mindless followers of religious “leaders.” Furthermore, as chapter 6 discussed, the typical rural preacher had few or no qualitative trappings of a “leader.” What Harry Richardson confessed of the rural black preachers he studied in the mid-40s was the general rule: “rural ministers in general are more on the level of the people than other rural workers. Their education is about the same as that of most members, and they are on the same social and economic level. For these reasons they are closer to the people and speak their language more than any other leader.”<sup>18</sup> This shared language was central to the dynamics of rural culture.

I have been able to locate some 40 rural sermons or sermon fragments from the period 1900-1950, a small number that may seem all too minimal for historians working with written source materials.<sup>19</sup> The difficulty in finding sources is itself testament to the overwhelming

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<sup>17</sup> J.W. Jent, *The Challenge of the Country Church* 108; Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 92

<sup>18</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 174

<sup>19</sup> *White sermons*: 3 from Walker County, Alabama [mid-30s, in *They Live on the Land*, fragments]; 2 from eastern Kentucky [1938, Archive of Folk Culture, complete]; 2 from Wise County, Virginia [1939, Archive of Folk Culture, complete]; western North Carolina [1941, Archive of Folk Culture, fragment]; *Black sermons*: Anderson County, South Carolina [1906, Bennett, “Revival Sermon”, fragment]; Eau Gallie, Florida [1929, *The Sanctified Church*, complete]; 3 from unclear origin [1930, *The Negro’s Church*, fragments]; 3 from Macon County, Alabama [early 1930s, *Shadow of the Plantation*, complete]; Brazoria County, Texas [1934, Archive of Folk Culture, complete]; 5 from Austin and Travis counties, Texas [1934-1939, *Quickened by De Spirit*, complete]; 2 from Sunflower County,

orality of the culture. Like the testimonies that were another distinct and developed form, oral sermons are lost to the historian unless some literate observer was there to transcribe or record the event. What survives in writing or on tape is hardly perfect: some of the sources are fragments of much longer sermons, which certainly give some of the feel but do not allow a sense of how the fragment was developed in the context of the whole. Only a ¼ of the 40-odd sermons are from white preachers, so the sample does not proportionally match demographics in the rural areas. Furthermore, the location of black sermons is fairly diffuse across the Deep South, with sermons from South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas. The white sermons are primarily from the mountains of eastern Kentucky, southwest Virginia, and western North Carolina, with hilly Walker County, Alabama being the exception. To my knowledge, no sermon from white tenants or sharecroppers in the Black Belt survives. The majority of the sermons come from the 1930s and early 40s. And there are no existing sermons from the Dyess Colony, nor do older people from Dyess remember specific sermons at sixty years' remove: it is simply not possible to know the exact sermons that Cash heard in his youth. In his public recollections, though, he did describe basic features of an oral culture, one in which sermons played a central part. Chapters 3 and 6 have noted the almost constant presence of song in Cash's youth, and chapter 4 noted the enduring impression that sermons on "sin and death and eternal hell without redemption" left on his imagination. Chapter 3 excerpted the rich stories he heard from a drifter named Jim George, and in that same forum, the *Journal of Country Music's* feature on "Growing Up Country," Cash wrote, "my father was a great storyteller. He'd tell us stories about the time he went to see Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in San Antonio in

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Mississippi [1935, *Caste and Class*, summary]; 2 from Wilcox County, Alabama [1941, Archive of Folk Culture, fragments]; 4 from Macon County, Georgia [late 1940s, *Say Amen Brother*, complete]

1912...My father had some wonderful stories.”<sup>20</sup> Ray also told stories about his own father, William Henry Cash, a farmer and Baptist preacher in Cleveland County, Arkansas, who “rode a horse and...carried a gun, and never once did he take a penny for his preaching.”<sup>21</sup>

Still, though the sources are hardly ideal and contain frustrating lacunae, the centrality of the form in rural worship demands examination. In the sermons we can see the oral culture in its most succinct and basic form. There are also two good reasons to think that the sample, though uneven and problematic, is fairly representative. First, as will be seen, images and anecdotes in the sermons recur in the testimonies, songs, personal accounts and other pieces of evidence from throughout the region: one eastern Kentucky preacher’s sermon may be the only recorded one to narrate a certain biblical anecdote, but that anecdote appears in the unguarded reflections of a white Georgia farm laborer, a black Arkansas sharecropper’s testimony, and a song heard in four states. Second, though the sample is weighted towards black sermons, the fieldwork of Rosenberg and Titon, with older people who grew up in the later years of the rural New South, demonstrates that black and white oral sermons do share significant elements. This finding supports the previous analysis, which has found similarities in testimony, song, and personal account, and qualifies somewhat the problem of the uneven sample.

Rural sermons were poetic; this was not just a romantic outsider’s projection on the simple “folk.” On an Easter morning in 1934 at Darrington state prison farm in Brazoria County, Texas, the black preacher Sin-Killer Griffin brought his convict listeners to the hill of Calvary:

I seen while he was hanging, the mountain began to tremble on which Jesus was hanging on. The blood was dropping on the mountain, holy blood, dropping on the mountain, my dear friends, corrupting the mountain. I seen then about that time while the blood was dropping down, one drop after another, I seen the sun that Jesus made in creation, the sun rose, my dear friends, and it recognized Jesus hanging on the cross. Just as soon as the

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<sup>20</sup> Holly George-Warren, “Growing Up Country” *Journal of Country Music* 16. See also Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* 12

<sup>21</sup> Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 4

sun recognized its maker, why it clothed itself in sack clothing and went down, went down in mourning. “Look at my maker hanging on the cross.” And when the sun went down, we seen the moon, that was his maker too, he made the moon. My dear friends, yes, both time and seasons. We seen, my dear friends, when the moon recognized Jesus dying on the cross. I see the moon, yes, took with a judgment hemorrhage and bled away. Good God, looked down—the dyin’ thief on the cross saw the moon goin’ down in blood...I seen the little stars, great God, that was there, they remembered Jesus when he struck on the anvil of time and the little stars began to show their beautiful ray of light. And the stars recognized their maker dying on the cross, each little star leaped out of silver orbit to make the torches of a dark unanointed world. It got so dark until the men who was putting Jesus to death, they said they could feel the darkness in their fingers. Great God almighty, they was close to one another and it was so dark they feel one another and hear one another and talk, but they couldn’t see each other. I heard one of the centurions say, “surely, surely, this must be the Son of God.”<sup>22</sup>

In Walker County, Alabama that same year, a white farmer who was not a high school graduate preached in Shady Grove Baptist church:

Isaac digged again the wells dug by his father, Abraham. In the wilderness where Isaac lived a well was a blessing to the traveler, it enriched the land and made things grow, and tents were built about it. A well was as great as a castle or a pyramid in that land and time. God, who is our salvation, is like a well to us...We need a closer approach to God, a greater fellowship with his children, and a greater desire to please Him. Let us gather around this well and record our vows that we will say goodbye to selfishness, thoughtlessness, and sin of every sort. Let us leave failure and set our faces toward Christ and drink of the water that He giveth. Let us go back to the Bible and bubble up for Him like an artesian well. Abraham gave the wells he dug a special name that meant the well of Him that liveth and seeth me. It is good for us to remember today that God sees us. Beersheba was the well of the oath or covenant between God and man. After his death Abraham’s wells were filled up by his enemies. Let us, like Isaac, dig up the old wells anew and blaze away for a greater church and a greater faith. Even in our failures Jesus loves us, for once when He found His disciples asleep, He explained that their eyes were heavy. Our wells have failed in the past because of the strife and hatred which we must forsake...<sup>23</sup>

In Travis County, Texas that same year black preacher Chester Hulen preached on “the Lord’s little children” in Bolton Creek Baptist church. Hulen had no formal education and was illiterate.

I can see mothers with their children, a-crowdin’ up closest. The mothers wantin’ their children to get blessed by Lord Jesus. And I can’t blame them mothers. Oh no, I can’t. Well, when they try to sit their children up to where they could get to the Lord Jesus, I can see old man Judas getting mad. He jumped up and starts rebuking the ladies and the

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<sup>22</sup> Archive of Folk Culture AFS 187A

<sup>23</sup> Paul Terry and Verner Sims, *They Live on the Land* 154-155

children. He say, “Get them children out of the way. The Lord Jesus ain’t got no time to bother himself with no children. Why the world didn’t you leave them children at home? Don’t come tryin’ to set them up here on this platform. We ain’t got no time for children.” And I can see the Lord Jesus jump up to his feet. He picked up one of the children and he turned round to Judas. He say, “Oh Judas, Judas, what you talkin’ about? Suffer these children to come unto me. Forbid them not, for the kingdom of Heaven belongs to them. What in the world you mean by tryin’ to keep these children away? These children is my children and I likes to have ‘em around me. Don’t ever let me here you rebuking my children again.” Amen, amen. Old Judas set down and shut up after that, but Lord Jesus wasn’t through. He looked at his disciples for a minute, then he say, “Don’t you know that you goin’ to have to become as a little child? Don’t you know a little child goin’ to lead you to glory?... Yes, Jesus was mad. Somebody done hurt his little children’s feelings, and the Lord Jesus don’t allow nobody to hurt his little children’s feelings. He don’t allow nobody to make his little children cry.”<sup>24</sup>

George Dinsmore, preaching at the white Laurel Grove Primitive Baptist church in the coal country of Wise County, Virginia in 1939, concluded his sermon with this warning:

I don’t know, some of you brethren might believe it but I want you to know it’s dangerous, some of our brethren begin to believe and think that Jesus never done nothing for you for eternity. I want you to understand if he hadn’t a done something for you for eternity he wouldn’t have never had to went down into that grave and conquered death, hell, and the grave. And brethren you wadn’t a fit subject for eternity until Jesus and you won’t be a fit subject for eternity until you come out of there just like Jesus did and you’ll be just like him and you’ll see him as he is. That’s the way I want to preach it and I’m gonna tell you the reason why Jesus went down there and I’ll get out of your way in a few minutes. Here’s the reason Jesus went down in the grave: he went, I’m gonna preach it, for *man*, and you brethren can have it just like you want it. That may be, it may be too strong for you, I don’t know. But I’m gonna preach it, it was a *man* that Jesus went down after, and I’m gonna preach it, it was a *man* that God created in his image and likeness and formed him up out of the ground and created him in his image and likeness, I’m gonna preach, it was that *ground* like I walk on and till.<sup>25</sup>

These sermon excerpts are marked by some of the basic features of oral discourse, as described by Walter Ong in his classic work *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*: repetition, formula, and the absence of exact verbatim memory. While each of the sermons is grounded in the written text of the Bible, none of them offers line-by-line exposition of the text, but rather uses that text as a jumping-off point to develop an idea, freely adding details or

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<sup>24</sup> John Henry Faulk, *Quickened by De Spirit* 38-39

<sup>25</sup> Archive of Folk Culture AFS 2769A-B2



changing the story as written. Griffin's evocation of the crucifixion is filled with his own arresting images to create a sense of cosmic lamentation—these details are nowhere in the Bible, nor do some of them make strict linear sense (how could the sun rise in the middle of the day, when according to the text Jesus was crucified? How could stars leap out of their orbits?). Chester Hulen says that it is “old man Judas” who denigrated the children, not “the disciples” as in the text, and Hulen puts new words into Judas' and Jesus' mouths to make his point about children and being childlike. Based on the transcription in *They Live on the Land*, the Walker County preacher did begin by reading a single verse about Isaac redigging Abraham's wells, but once the well image is presented, he moves freely from one biblical story to another (from Isaiah to John to the difference between grace and law), maintaining his running theme of wells, before concluding with the summons to his listeners to dig their own wells again.

Dinsmore, Hulen, and Griffin use mnemonic devices in stitching together their sermons. Rosenberg has identified such devices as basic to oral sermons and their spontaneous (as opposed to reading off a manuscript) composition, and he has found that oral preachers will typically have their own favorite devices. These short repeated phrases give the preacher a structure in the absence of a written text, and they allow a little breathing space for composition between every several lines of the sermon. Griffin uses “I seen” or “we seen,” “my dear friends,” and “great God” or “good God” throughout the course of weaving together a verbal portrait of a single scene. Hulen also uses “I can see,” and “oh no, I can't” and “amen, amen” also seem to offer a pause while he composes the next few lines. “I'm gonna preach it” is Dinsmore's favored device, repeated five times in the concluding section of the sermon. “I want you to know,” “I want you to understand,” and “I don't know” also appear to mark time and structure thoughts. In addition to these phrases, the sermon excerpts are rather obviously repetitive. The reader, as

opposed to the hearer in the original context of an oral culture, will perhaps find them limited, developing an idea or image and going back over it again and again, without ever getting very abstract. This is intrinsic to the patterns of orality. “In an oral culture,” Ong argued, “knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost.”<sup>26</sup>

Observers did note these patterns, even if they were not sympathetic to or understanding of their function. From the Smoky Mountains in 1914, a Baptist home missionary wrote of a church service in a log schoolhouse. “The long sermon,” she wrote, “rhythmical throughout, was simply a string of quotations chosen at random from Genesis to Revelation, with the text, ‘If thou be the Christ-ah/ Tell us plainly-ah’ brought in with the regularity of a refrain.”<sup>27</sup> At a rural black church near his Mississippi plantation, Howard Snyder described a service in 1920: the preacher “begins in a loud, singsong manner, keeping time with the singing of the congregation...on and on at great length he hammers his theme out until it is thin as tinfoil.”<sup>28</sup> In the mid-30s, at the funeral for a young white man who had been murdered in Walker County, Alabama, Paul Terry and Verner Sims noted that in his funeral sermon the preacher “chang[ed] from a natural voice to a rhythmic chant.”<sup>29</sup> “Worshippers often follow the preacher through his sermon in a mental state of song,” Howard Odum and Guy Johnson wrote in their 1925 study *The Negro and His Songs*, “and when he has finished they burst out into song, singing no other than an elaborate sentence which the preacher has used in his sermon.”<sup>30</sup> Harry Richardson, in his mid-40s study of black tenants and farmers in four counties, alleged that such oral sermons were simply “a heated

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<sup>26</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982):24

<sup>27</sup> *Our Home Field* 5/14

<sup>28</sup> Howard Snyder, “A Plantation Revival Service” *Yale Review* 172

<sup>29</sup> Paul Terry and Verner Sims, *They Live on the Land* 186

<sup>30</sup> Howard Odum and Guy Johnson, *The Negro and His Songs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1925):112

hodge-podge of emotional shibboleths mixed with bits of common sense,” that of the sermons he heard “many were crude and some were ‘otherworldly.’”<sup>31</sup>

With more reflective distance and without a sense of dismissal, sociologist Frank Alexander and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston described basic elements of the oral culture. Studying a white tenant and small farming community in western Tennessee in the late 30s, Alexander noted that “religion is stereotyped not only in objective and physical practices but also in phraseology and ideation. No religious leader can hope to satisfy who fails to conform to the stereotypes.”<sup>32</sup> Hurston, who traveled widely but especially focused on black folkways in her native Florida, argued in the 1920s that “beneath the seeming informality of religious worship there is a set formality. Sermons, prayers, moans and testimonies have their definite forms. The individual may hang as many new ornaments upon the traditional form as he likes, but the audience would be disagreeably surprised if the form were abandoned.”<sup>33</sup>

Hurston’s and Alexander’s ruminations call attention to what Ong described as perhaps the central aspect of oral discourse: the use of formula. Building on Milman Parry’s interpretation of the composition of *The Odyssey*, on Albert Lord’s fieldwork with Serbo-Croatian singers, and others, Ong argued that in an oral culture “formulaic thought patterns were essential,” that the creative poet works not by inspiration *sui generis*, but rather through stitching or weaving together formulas already at hand, or what the Greeks called “rhapsodizing.”<sup>34</sup> Consider this rural black sermon excerpt that Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson heard during their 1930 fieldwork:

Sometimes the devil tries to lead me. I send him away, and call in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. God in Heaven will baptize me and He will save me. He will lead me

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<sup>31</sup> Harry Richardson, *Dark Glory* 91-92

<sup>32</sup> Frank Alexander, “Religion in a Rural Community of the South” *American Sociological Review* 248

<sup>33</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* 83

<sup>34</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 24,13

through the chilly waters of Jordan. If you have the love of God in your heart, if you know about the doctrines of the Holy Spirit, you will be saved. He knows the plan of my salvation. My Lord! My Lord! I want you to journey on; I do not want you to turn back. He was pierced in the side. He was nailed on Calvary's rugged cross. I can see them as they hung Him there. I can see them as they laid Him in the tomb. He brought light out of darkness. He died that we might have eternal life; that we might have a right to the tree of life. I know His blood has made me whole.<sup>35</sup>

In the mountains of western North Carolina in 1941, a region with a very small black population, a white preacher used the first image in his own sermon—and attributed it a black source. “Colored man said, when the devil comes to my heart's door and knocks on my heart's door, devil comes there and knocks, that I send Mr. Jesus to the door. When Mr. Devil sees Mr. Jesus come to the door he says, ‘Pardon me, I'm at the wrong house.’ That's the reason the devil gets you so much, you poke your own head out. Send the Lord of glory to the door and the devil gets gone.”<sup>36</sup> Vera Hall, in the Alabama Black Belt county of Sumter, used the third image. “If you know Christ and have got religion, why, some kind of mind tells you, ‘That's not right. Don't do that. Act right,’” she told Alan Lomax in the late 40s. “That's the religion part. But if you ain't got religion in your heart, you just don't care...See, religion will make you pure and honest in your heart and you'll have the heart and mind to love everybody.”<sup>37</sup> A decade earlier, a white tenant in western Tennessee answered Frank Alexander's abstract prose question, “will you make a statement of what religion means to you?” with words that echoed Hall's and the preacher's: “a true Christian has the love of God in his heart and all power.”<sup>38</sup> The preacher's terse description of the crucifixion shares phrasing with the successive stanzas of the black-white spiritual “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” which George Jackson traced back to 1880s Tennessee: “were you there when they crucified my Lord?...were you there when they

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<sup>35</sup> Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *Negro's Church* 247

<sup>36</sup> Archive of Folk Culture AFS 4920B

<sup>37</sup> Alan Lomax, *Rainbow Sign* 115

<sup>38</sup> Frank Alexander, “Religion in a Rural Community” 242

nailed him to the cross?...were you there when they laid him in the tomb?”<sup>39</sup> The last two phrases appear almost verbatim in songs from either end of the region. Guy and Candie Carawan heard “ain’t you got a right to the tree of life” on the Sea Islands in the 60s, and in 1927 the central Texas songster and street preacher Blind Willie Johnson recorded “I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole,” a song that he clearly assumed his audience knew, since Johnson in his recording never uses the whole phrase, but rather selectively omits words (a technique that he used on numerous songs, and functioned to draw listeners in by making them complete the lyric).<sup>40</sup>

Or consider another formula, this one a proverb: “if salvation was a thing money could buy/ then the rich would live and the poor would die.” John Lomax heard this line being sung at a rural black church in the Brazos bottomlands of central Texas in the mid 30s, Carter Woodson reported it as a standard axiom heard during his regional fieldwork in the late 20s, the piedmont North Carolina street preacher Gary Davis worked it into his song “I am the True Vine” in the mid 30s, and a folklorist heard it in a quartet’s song in Colbert County, Alabama in 1945. A companion line, “I am so glad God fixed it/ that the rich man must die as well as the poor,” was shouted out during the service that Lomax witnessed, and Fisk graduate student Andrew Watson heard it in his central Tennessee fieldwork in the late 20s.<sup>41</sup>

Analyzing southern black folk songs and folk poetry in a 1911 study, Howard Odum used the term “formulas” to describe phrases that circulated orally over a wide geographical expanse, though since the 1930s the term “floating lyrics” has been the principal one used by folklorists.

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<sup>39</sup> George Jackson, *White and Negro Spirituals: Their Life Span and Kinship* (New York: J.J. Augustin, 1943):220-221

<sup>40</sup> Guy and Candie Carawan, *Ain’t You Got a Right to the Tree of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967)

<sup>41</sup> John Lomax, *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* 232; Carter Woodson, *Rural Negro* 174; Gary Davis, “I Am the True Vine” 1935 *Goodbye, Babylon*; Robert Halli, ed. *An Alabama Songbook* 216; Lomax, *Adventures* 229; Andrew Watson, “Negro Primitive Religious Services” in Clifton Johnson, ed. *God Struck Me Dead* 11

Folklorist Carl Lindahl describes these as “lines that have circulated so long in folk communities that tradition-steeped singers call them instantly to mind and rearrange them constantly, and often unconsciously, to suit their personal and community aesthetics.”<sup>42</sup> At any rate, formula or floating lyric, stock phrases and verbal images were basic to the articulation of religion in the rural South. An awareness to devices for oral transmission thus clarifies John Dollard’s suspicion about the Sunflower County tenant preacher—“I marveled that he could have invented such a sermon.” The preacher did not “invent” the sermon out of thin air or through his own solitary creative genius. This was not, however, because as a man with minimal formal education, the tenant preacher was incapable of profound or artful thinking. Rather, because he was immersed in an oral culture, he had received a different kind of education, and could draw on existing orally circulated formulas without needing to invent a sermon from scratch.

Formulas and repetition thus preserved knowledge in danger of being lost, and Ong argues that orality involves a conservative or traditionalist spirit.<sup>43</sup> Harry Crews, who came of age in tobacco tenancy in Bacon County, Georgia in the 30s and 40s before making his own personal transition from orality to literacy, writes in his memoir *A Childhood* that “nothing is allowed to die in a society of storytelling people. It is all—the good and the bad—carted up and brought along from one generation to the next.”<sup>44</sup> This traditionalism is the clue to what has been described in previous chapters: rural Protestants who preserved, worked within, and deepened patterns of early (18<sup>th</sup> century) evangelicalism, even as town and city Protestants originated significant innovations in the late nineteenth century, particularly evident in the move from evil to bad (chapter 4) and from called preachers to professionalized ministers (chapter 6). Barely touched by the variety of literature being printed by the denominational offices (see statistics in

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<sup>42</sup> Carl Lindahl, “Thrills and Miracles: Legends of Lloyd Chandler” 152

<sup>43</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 41-42

<sup>44</sup> Harry Crews, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* 4

chapter 2), rural Protestants worked with what they had in oral formulation. Of course, context establishes meaning, so as the previous chapters have argued, older traditions and creative adaptations of tradition took on new meaning in the context of the culture of the New South. These new meanings and the force they acquired should put the lie to the idea that a static and simple “old time religion” was a fossilized timepiece with no present relevance in the world of the New South.

So also should the sermons with their sense of a living past. Folklorists Brett Sutton, working with black and white Primitive Baptists throughout the southeast, and Bruce Grindal, doing fieldwork in a rural black community in North Florida, have articulated this practice of the suspension of time. Sutton writes that “biblical and experiential truth are two points on a single continuum...institutionalized and personalized myths are complementary. The difference between the vision of the Old Testament prophets, as expressed in Scripture, and those of individual church members, expressed as narrative, is one of degree, not kind.”<sup>45</sup> In a similar vein, Grindal argues that “the preacher creates in his sermon a sense of drama wherein the historical distance between the present day and biblical times is so minimal that biblical personages become first- and second-person realities in the current lives of the congregation.”<sup>46</sup> Sutton and Grindal both arrived at these conclusions doing fieldwork in the rural South in the late 1970s, but they are helpful in making sense of the spirit of rural sermons in the New South era, when such practices were more widespread.

In a different sermon in the mid-30s, Travis County, Texas preacher Chester Hulen imagined Jesus walking the country roads of the present:

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<sup>45</sup> Brett Sutton, “Language, Vision, Myth: The Primitive Baptist Experience of Grace” in Hall and Stack, eds. *Holding on to the Land and the Lord* 110

<sup>46</sup> Bruce Grindal, “The Religious Interpretation of Experience in a Rural Black Community” in Hall and Stack 95

...he goin to walk around some more. He goin to see old brother Franklin out working in the field. He goin to watch brother Franklin, and he goin to see him when he takes the team out and goes to the barn. He goin to see him feed his team, and then he goin to see him go down on his knees out there in the mule lot, and pray. Jesus goin to see brother Franklin prayin, and he goin to rejoice. Praise the Lord. He goin to say, 'Yonder's one of my children that's goin to live with me in glory.' Oh, yes he is. He goin to go down past old brother Ford's place, and he goin to see brother Ford. He goin to see brother Ford out in the blacksmith shed, a-hammerin away on a hot plow point, and a-singin one of the Lord's church songs. He goin to see the light of salvation shinin in old brother Ford's face, and then he goin to rejoice again. He goin to say, 'There's one of my children that's ready for glory.'<sup>47</sup>

Hulen invited his listeners to imagine a very present Jesus, not a distant figure from the past but one who witnessed little details of everyday labor. In the process, evoking it rather than stating it prosaically, Hulen conveyed a sense of the dignity of manual labor—at odds with a New South culture that denigrated it.

Tanner Franklin, preaching at a black Baptist church in the Brazos bottomlands of Austin County, Texas, brought the parable of the lost sheep into the rural pattern of life:

There ain't a road you walk and there ain't a place you pass, that old Satan ain't hidin round, tryin to catch you. He's watchin for you on Saturday nights, when you goes in town, and he's watchin for you when you come out of town. He's always just more than ready to catch one of the Lord's sheeps. Amen. It's so, church. Old Satan catch a sheep out in the wilderness somewhere, then he go to the Lord and try to tell him that there's just one sheep lost, so that ain't so bad. But the Lord don't pay no mind to that sort of talk. No, he don't. The Lord knows that he's got to have all them sheeps in that pen before he can rest right. He's got to go out there and find every last one of his sheeps, before he can say that his sheeps is saved. Amen. Well, there was a day, long time ago when the Lord got tired of having old Satan steal his sheeps. He got tired of having a sheep missing every time he turned around, then having old Satan come a-traipsin' up to him and telling him that it never made no difference about there being just one sheep gone, because one little sheep never mattered.<sup>48</sup>

Franklin was speaking on the last night of a two week revival, when the communal fervor was to end and people were to return to their typical patterns. These patterns took place in a culture that questioned whether the life of the poor, especially a single humble life, really mattered. Mark

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<sup>47</sup> John Henry Faulk, *Quickened by De Spirit* 34

<sup>48</sup> Faulk 10-11



Zwonitzer argued that this problem of the ultimate worth of a single life in modernizing southern society was a basic theme in the music of the Carter Family (1927-1943), one that they sought to confront and challenge.<sup>49</sup> Tanner Franklin did it through the story of the one lost sheep, imagining that naysaying dark voice as Satan's, overridden by God the shepherd who cared untiringly for every single lost or little sheep.

"I can see" or "I see" was a mnemonic device (see above), but it also created a sense of very present drama. Sin-Killer Griffin transported his convict listeners to the scene of the crucifixion, leading them in imagination from one little detail to another. Griffin developed and accentuated a sense of cosmic forsakenness well beyond what is in the biblical text. Through this, and by doing it as a first person witness, Griffin invited his convict audience—also criminal and shunned—to identify with and imaginatively attach themselves to Jesus. Chester Hulen put his listeners immediately into the scene of Jesus and the little children, and his fellow Travis County preacher Giles Cummins narrated the story of David and Goliath as a firsthand witness: "Well, I can see a paschal lamb with sheeps a-grazin. And I can see a little boy sitting there playing his harp. He weren't studying no war, he was studying about the Lord. Little David sat there and played on his harp, and he sung to the sheeps. He was a praying child. Yes, good Lord, he was a praying child."<sup>50</sup> Like the little children that were Jesus' favorites, "little David" became the hero in the victory of the Israelites. Both sermons indirectly communicated God's favoritism for the lowly not in the frozen past but in the living past/present.

In Macon County, Georgia in the late 40s, a preacher witnessed the dispute of Ahab and Naboth: "I saw him...Ahab went down and tried to find Naboth in the vineyard...Naboth said, 'No, Lord, I can't labor in the vineyard.' But bye and bye old Ahab got mad and went on home.

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<sup>49</sup> Mark Zwonitzer with Charles Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?* 102

<sup>50</sup> John Henry Faulk, *Quickened by De Spirit* 70

Ain't that right, brethren? While Ahab had gone home, his wife—he got in the bed, he wouldn't eat nothing and he wasn't, wouldn't drink nothing—his wife said to him, 'What's the matter with you?' He said, 'I went down to trade with Naboth concerning his vineyard and he wouldn't trade. I offered him 'so much' land; I offered him even 'so much' money.' Ehhhhhhh! Ahab couldn't get the vineyard. Jezebel said, 'Don't worry.' Had him taken down the hill and stoned to death."<sup>51</sup> The preacher went on to describe how Elijah, the lonely righteous prophet, rebuked evil king Ahab and queen Jezebel, and how he ultimately triumphed. Labor disputes in the rural New South, the difficulty of holding on to land even when acquired, and the easy use of violence to maintain the rule of the powerful were not stated directly or prosaically in the sermon, but they were not far from the surface as the preacher developed his theme that God will vindicate the mistreated and the weak.

First person narration was a device that a number of preachers used—in addition to those above, the device was heard in sermons at Parchman state farm in Mississippi and in Murrells Inlet, South Carolina in the early 30s, and in the late 70s Bruce Grindal still heard it as a regular feature in the black churches of the rural Midway community in north Florida.<sup>52</sup> More common, though, was a narration of biblical characters as if they were present companions. Though opaque to certain dynamics, Arthur Raper noted the “adeptness in Biblical portraiture” of the rural black preachers he studied in Greene and Macon counties in Georgia in the mid-30s. “He talks to his congregation about Moses and Daniel at midday as though he had eaten breakfast with them,” Raper wrote.<sup>53</sup> Howard Odum had noted this familiarity with biblical characters in the black religious folk songs he collected some twenty-five years earlier. “A rich variety of

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<sup>51</sup> William Pipes, *Say Amen Brother: Old-Time Negro Preaching: A Study in American Frustration* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1992 [1951]):40-41

<sup>52</sup> Archive of Folk Culture AFS619, AFS832; Bruce Grindal, “Religious Interpretation” in Hall and Stack, eds. 95

<sup>53</sup> Arthur Raper, *Preface to Peasantry* 368

references to scriptural characters is seen in the majority of the Negro spirituals...the Negro portrays the conduct of heroes in the past with imaginative skill. Their songs are often running-stories of scripture, in which the effort is made to include as many characters as possible.”<sup>54</sup>

Sociologist Charles Johnson provided the greatest insight into the meaning of narrating these characters. Based on his study of Macon County, Alabama in the early 30s, he argued that “the dramatization of incidents of the New Testament constitutes a large part of the sermon, but the experiences are so related as to make it possible for [the] people to identify themselves with the characters in this great struggle.”<sup>55</sup>

Raper, Odum, and Johnson were all describing rural black religion, but dramatization of biblical characters, with a sense of immediate familiarity that invited personal identification, was a hallmark of sermons both black and white. The Samaritan woman who spoke with Jesus at the well appeared in the sermons of white preachers in Walker County, Alabama (c1935) and eastern Kentucky (1938). Nicodemus, the educated teacher who could not understand Jesus’ elusive statement about being born again, figured in a white sermon from eastern Kentucky (1938) and a black sermon from central Texas (1941). Paul, fervent persecutor of the church turned evangelist, was the centerpiece of black sermons at Atmore Prison Farm in southern Alabama (1934) and Macon County in middle Alabama (early 30s). The prophet John, criminalized and in solitude on the isle of Patmos when he received visions, was the main character in black sermons in Anderson County, South Carolina (1906), on a plantation in Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana (1934), and in Austin County, Texas (late 30s). Many of the sermons feature solitary characters, lonely models of faithfulness to God despite social rejection: Ruth, who leaves family behind (white, Walker County, Alabama, mid-30s), Abraham commanded to

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<sup>54</sup> Howard Odum, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Southern Negro* 31-32

<sup>55</sup> Charles Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* 159

kill his only son (black, Macon County, Alabama, early 30s), Daniel who “kept the old church ship sailing himself” (black, Travis County, Texas, 1936), the prodigal son who squanders wealth in a foreign country (black, Travis County, Texas, late 30s and Wilcox County, Alabama, 1941), Noah alone with the animals (black, Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1935), Samson fighting the Philistines with a mule’s jawbone (black, Austin County, Texas, 1938), persecuted Elijah (black, Macon County, Georgia, late 40s), Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers (black, Macon County, Georgia, late 40s).

For Ben Palmer, preaching at a black church in Travis County, Texas in the 30s, Adam was the name of the prodigal son who was a model of pride and wealth in the New South:

I can see Adam now, stickin his money in his pocket, takin his belongings and struttin off. Oh, but he was the biggest thing that ever happened! And there was his poor old daddy standin there at the gate, a-shakin his head and sayin goodbye. He knowed Adam never had sense enough to come in out of the rain. And he knowed couldn’t nobody tell Adam nothing. Adam goin to have to find out for himself. Amen. Yes, I can see him now. Oh, yonder he go—marching along the road calling himself big... Well, it weren’t no time til the word got around that there was a smart-aleck with money in town, and that’s just what old Satan always watchin for.<sup>56</sup>

At Little St. John’s church in Anderson County, South Carolina in 1905, a black preacher positioned his listeners with John on Patmos:

How you reckon the Lord let three or four or five wicked men take John and do him like they done him, them lowdown, despicable and disreputable men, what bound John hand and foot with ropes and fetters and chains and bonds, and took him aboard that unfit ship, and fetch him away down to that Lonesome Valley... [God] let em take John way over in that Lonesome Valley, where there wasn’t a man, nor a house, nor a village, nor a marshal to prevent the imposition of wicked people, and they chained him to a tree... Now with John chained there, there come a voice a-callin, ‘John, O John! Come up hear; come up here, John!’ ‘What do you want, Lord? What do you want, now?’ ‘Come and see! Come and see!’<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Faulk 55-56

<sup>57</sup> John Bennett, “A Revival Sermon at Little St. John’s” *Atlantic Monthly* 98 (August 1906):260

This angelic invitation, “come and see,” became a recurrent refrain to draw the congregation into the visions that John saw. These came to a solitary man in the lonesome valley, as they would to the receptive, lonely souls in the formulaic testimonies (chapter 5).

As Odum noted, songs that circulated in the rural South were chock full of these characters. This should be no surprise, since formulas or floating lyrics from songs made their way into sermons, and vice versa, in a codified pattern of transmission basic to oral culture. John of Patmos was the dramatic subject in Blind Willie Johnson’s “John the Revelator,” and in “John Don Saw That Number.” Noah was the hero in “God Gave Noah the Rainbow Sign” and “The Old Ark’s a Movin.” Daniel and his deliverance from the lion’s den were worked into “Old Time Religion.” The Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well became the principal subject of central Texas preacher Washington Phillips’ song “Life Him Up That’s All.” These examples could be multiplied at length, demonstrating subtle variations across space and time, but the heavy use of biblical characters to concretize religious ideas shows another basic aspect of orality, that thinking is “situational rather than abstract.”<sup>58</sup>

Observers of rural people noted this concrete manner of thinking in contexts both secular and religious. Doing fieldwork with white tenants and croppers in Sunflower County, Mississippi in the mid-30s, Leonard Doob found them “eager to talk about themselves,” but that “they underwent a miraculous transformation when they tried to become abstract.”<sup>59</sup> Theodore Rosengarten, speaking with the elderly small farmer Ned Cobb in Macon County, Alabama in the late 60s, recalled: “we asked him right off why he joined the union. He didn’t respond directly; rather, he ‘interpreted’ the question and began, ‘I was haulin a load of hay out of

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<sup>58</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 49

<sup>59</sup> Leonard Doob, “Poor Whites: A Frustrated Class” appendix I in John Dollard, *Caste and Class* 450

Apafalya one day—’and continued uninterrupted for eight hours.”<sup>60</sup> In a white small farming and tenant community in western Tennessee, sociologist Frank Alexander asked this question in his mid-30s fieldwork: “will you make a statement of what religion means to you?” He noted that “the answers given and the effort involved in giving them were revealing. To most of those who were asked the question, it came as a surprise. They had no ready answers. Some asked that they be allowed to think it over; others were frankly puzzled.” Alexander argued that this was “indicative of the small degree to which religion has been rationalized,” that it demonstrated “the vague, generalized nature of the people’s religious faith.”<sup>61</sup> In a way he was right; rural religion was not rationalized or framed in abstract prose, but rather concretized in characters, stories, and verbal images. But it was hardly vague or generalized, as the above sermons with their dramatic immersion in the biblical narrative show. People struggled to answer Alexander’s questions because the rules of discourse were different. To the question of how one derived courage in the face of discouragement, one tenant replied, “put my trust in the Lord. I think of the song, ‘Take Your Burdens to the Lord and Leave Them There.’” To the question of what one would do if there was not a God, one farmer replied, “I’d be like Paul. I would be of all people most miserable.”<sup>62</sup> What comes out in Alexander’s field report, as in the reflections of Doob and Rosengarten, are two forms of discourse speaking past each other: academics, models of literacy and its abstract prose rationalism, and rural people immersed in an oral culture, framing knowledge in stories and poetic concretions.

From this it should be clear that the timeworn term “fundamentalist” is not just unhelpful but in fact actively misleading in making sense of the language of rural Protestantism. As William Glass and Samuel Shepherd have shown, there was a Fundamentalist movement in the

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<sup>60</sup> Theodore Rosengarten, *All God’s Dangers* xiv

<sup>61</sup> Frank Alexander, “Religion in a Rural Community” 241-242

<sup>62</sup> Frank Alexander, “Religion in a Rural Community” 242-243

South in the period 1900-1950, small but growing, and based in the larger cities. The real locus of the movement, George Marsden demonstrated, was in the larger national cities: New York, Baltimore, Minneapolis, Los Angeles. Rigorous prose rationalists, the Fundamentalists lived and moved in a world of literacy. They would never have sanctioned free play with the biblical text, nor a thin and translucent line between biblical past and personal present.

Awareness of the different mentalities of orality and literacy is critical to debunking a persistent trope: that the rural poor were *inarticulate* benefactors or victims of the socioeconomic order of the New South, that they had no independent stance—especially one informed by religion—on the dynamics of power in New South society. This has been difficult to see because the dominant culture needed to believe that “poor white trash and shiftless niggers” had no substantive thoughts of their own, much less a critique of the powerful (chapter 3). But it has also been opaque because its mode was not that of prose statements of tangible policy. Cultural theorist John Fiske and theologian Tex Sample explain how different modes of discourse may contain elements of social critique. Fiske calls this “semiotic resistance,” or the oppressed’s enactment in signs and symbols of a different interpretation of their lives. In his interpretation of country music and the white working-class, Sample argues that the music “is not a discursive analysis of social and political issues but rather it puts a human face on them and sings the heartache and pathos of working-class life,” thereby performing a sense of dignity denied by the dominant culture.<sup>63</sup> Some of the above sermon excerpts have already suggested this semiotic resistance, one that put a human face on such New South concerns as the valorization of wealth and the denigration of the lowly. We can regularize this some with close attention to a few standardized themes in rural sermons. In their study of oral poetry Parry and Lord found

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<sup>63</sup> John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Tex Sample, *White Soul: Country Music, the Church, and Working Americans* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996):134

recurrent stock themes, amplifications of the formulas, and this is what we find in the body of rural sermons.

A central theme was that of lowly Jesus, the Man of Sorrows. On first thought, it would seem that such images are simply basic Christianity, reflecting no particular or distinct emphasis. But as a long line of historians from Albert Schweitzer (in his 1906 *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*) to Jaroslav Pelikan (in his 1985 *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*) have demonstrated, images of Jesus are hardly static over time, but rather change to reflect and embody the concerns of different epochs and contexts. The figure in rural sermons is the persecuted man who suffers violence (black, Eau Gallie, Florida, 1929; black, Brazoria County, Texas, 1934), whose followers could expect the same (black, Macon County, Alabama, early 1930s; black, Austin County, Texas, late 30s), who was ridiculed and insulted by his contemporaries (white, Walker County, Alabama, 1935), ignored by those caught up in the frivolity of the world (black, Travis County, Texas, 1934), and demonstrated in his violent death that “the blood route” was the path to God (white, eastern Kentucky, 1938). Sin-Killer Griffin painted a dramatic verbal portrait of the crucifixion in his Easter sermon (above). The white eastern Kentucky coal miner and preacher Findlay Donaldson gave a more expository sermon based on the theme of blood:

...if you ain't got a blood bought religion you ain't got a thing in the world...Because the Bible plainly tells us that Jesus Christ died on Calvary's cross and shed the last drop of his blood that through him, not through some church, not through some big fine house, not through some big fine school, not through some great big preacher, not through some other way, but the way that the Lord has laid down, the plan of salvation...According to the blood, by the blood, according to the blood—thank God, the blood, the plan of salvation has always been the blood route...There's no man can stand between you and your sins. He may be great in this world. He may have a great influence. He may have come from some great family and the citizens of the community they might speak well of him. They might say, 'o look at him, he's great, he's wonderful'—but did you know in the plan of God there's no man greater than his precious son...<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Archive of Folk Culture AFS 1979A-1983A



Donaldson wove together the stories of Abel's sacrifice that pleased God, of Moses and the plague on the firstborn, with that of Jesus' crucifixion to argue that the Bible taught self-sacrifice as the path to God. He contrasted this with the structures of power in the world, structures that rested on one variety or another of human self-assertion: "that's the reason the whole world today's in poverty. That's the reason the whole world today's in envy. That's the reason today that men have got murder in their hearts. That's the reason today many seek their own good. That's the reason why men wants to kill and murder, wants to steal and rob." He concluded by envisioning an ideal society built on dependence and sacrifice for God and neighbor: "wouldn't it be wonderful today if every man and every women had their minds on God, was serving the great Jehovah, was depending on God for their food and for raiment, was looking to God as their keeper, the author and teacher of their faith...Wouldn't it be wonderful, couldn't we break bread then from house to house. Couldn't we go down to brother Henry's and if he needed food couldn't we go down then and divide. Why—because it's the blood teaching."

A second theme was a steadfast denial that wealth indicated any moral superiority, that instead it carried a voice of deceit and falsehood. The floating lyric "if salvation was a thing money could buy/ then the rich would live and the poor would die" has already been noted, but in the sermons themselves this idea appears in story form, as the story of Jesus and the rich young man (white, western North Carolina, 1941) and Jesus and a rich lawyer (black, Travis County, Texas, 1935). A companion story, that of Lazarus and the rich man, was likely also worked into sermons. In the 30s G.W. Blevins, a white farmer, miner, and preacher in Wise County, Virginia, composed a song about righteous Lazarus and the rich man who was damned, and Oliver Garland, a miner and preacher in eastern Kentucky, father to singers Jim, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Aunt Molly Jackson, taught them a lengthy "Ballad of Lazarus." In addition to

these two preachers' songs, Lazarus was commemorated in the song "Po' Lazarus," heard from black singers in Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas.<sup>65</sup> Floating lyrics invoking either Lazarus or the rich young man appear in a variety of songs, such as "Old Time Religion" (heard in Kentucky) and "God Gave Noah the Rainbow Sign" (heard in Kentucky, Virginia). These song references, especially the floating lyrics, rely on acquaintance with the biblical stories for their meaning.

The central Texas black preacher Chester Hulen vividly depicted this theme. Having narrated Jesus' favoritism to the little children (see above), Hulen went on to contrast this with Jesus' reaction to a rich lawyer:

...I can see your rich lawyer man now. He live mighty big down here on earth. He knowed all the answers before the questions was asked, down here. He owned nigh on all the land round the countryside. Oh, but he was important. He have hisself driven round in a great big car. I can see him that day, sittin back in his chair. Sittin back, smoking a cigar, and telling the man where to drive him to. He say, 'Drive me up to the gates of Heaven and blow the horn when you gets me there.' Then he settle back and smoke his cigar and rest hisself. Goin to glory. Oh, yes he is. Oh, I can see him. I can see him. Here he come, drivin real slow up to them great big gates. Big lawyer man tell his driver to blow his horn. The driver blow the horn, but the gate stay shut. Lawyer man say, 'Oh, driver, driver, blow the horn a little louder.' He blow the horn louder, but nobody open the gate. Lawyer say, 'Why I just declare. They must not of got word that I was a-comin'. Boy, go in there and tell em that I is here. Tell em that I'm here. And I'm ready to come in.' They sent word back that he have to wait his time to be judged. The lawyer man fuss, but he waits his time. He never had no say-so in it. He had to wait. I can see the Lord Jesus now, when he get the rich man before him. Little angel children sailing all round about his judging stand. They callin to the Lord Jesus, and he a-callin' back to them. Sitting there in his judge seat in the morning sunshine. The lawyer try to give the Lord Jesus a cigar. Lawd Jesus never take it, but he just study the lawyer man hard. The lawyer man smile and say, 'I's Judge so and so. I's ready for my white robe and my silvery wings.' Lord Jesus say, 'Sorry, but we can't let you come in. I can see already you ain't become as no little child. You been too important in your goings on. You ain't never stop long enough to become as no little child...'<sup>66</sup>

Hulen concluded by imploring his listeners to become like little children—not to aspire to or interiorize the valuations embodied in the New South elite. The cigar-puffing lawyer could have

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<sup>65</sup> *Checklist of Recorded Songs in the English Language in the Archive of American Folk Song* 316-317

<sup>66</sup> John Henry Faulk, *Quickened by De Spirit* 40-41

been William Faulkner's emblematic furnishing merchant: "he was the largest landholder...in one county and Justice of the Peace in the next and election commissioner in both, and hence the fountainhead if not of law at least of advice and suggestion."<sup>67</sup> Hulen sought to unmask the presumption to authority of such a figure, to instead evoke and dramatize Jesus' summons to be humbly receptive.

A third pervasive theme was that of the ignorance of the supposedly wise and the mysterious insight granted to the apparently simple. Preachers depicted this in the story of Nicodemus and Jesus (white, eastern Kentucky, 1938; black, Travis County, Texas, 1941), in his society's misunderstanding of who Jesus was (white, Walker County, Alabama, 1934), in the humble simplicity of the disciples (black, location unclear, 1930), in the prophet Daniel explaining the cryptic writing on Belshazzar's wall (black, Travis County, Texas, 1936), in the mysterious Spirit that provided insight into the ways of God (black, location unclear, 1930; black, Macon County, Georgia, late 40s). The black central Texas preacher Samuel Davis gave an elaborate version of the Nicodemus story in a 1941 sermon:

...this man here Nicodemus, a man that had great authorities, he was a man that was a ruler of the Jews, and he had the authorities to examine anybody's religion. Anything that you thought about your religion Nicodemus had the power to come in and see whether it come up to the requirements. Text this evening going to be 'you must be born again,' a subject the teacher didn't have any diploma...about a teacher that didn't have any diploma, one that was born in a little lowly home. And people in that day looked for a man's diploma as people do today. They look for your diploma on the wall somewhere and if your diploma is not on the wall you're not recognized, not only in that day but in this day. If people can't find your diploma of some college you're not recognized as a citizen capable of doing the kind of work Jesus was doing. So here we find the scribes, Pharisees coming to Nicodemus, bringing him the reports of what they heard this little teacher say. They said we was down yonder in the synagogue and we heard him teaching down there...so these men come to Nicodemus, told him that 'this little teacher's teaching men concerning being born again,' and, 'I knows Nicodemus if there's anything to it, I know you're a man that's able and capable, and I know you know all about people being born again'...I seen them when they brought him word about being born and

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<sup>67</sup> William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* quoted in Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* 1

Nicodemus said, ‘well, I’ll go back first and search my library, see if I can find him anywhere in the school of the learned, see if I can find him mentioned, and we’ll recognize him...[the scribes] said, ‘we was down yonder in the synagogues and he come in and he whooped men out of the synagogues and said, “you’ve took my father’s house and made merchants out of it.” And then we heard him tell some folks they had to be born again. So we couldn’t unravel the question, we just took note of it and brought it to you, Nicodemus—what do it mean about being born again?’ Why, people in the world today are still ignorant, whole lot of folks today don’t know...Nicodemus says, ‘I’ll bring you word at the sitting of the next session. I’ll dismiss the courts now and go back and search my library and see if I can find it in there.’ Well, he went back and spent a year in his own library and couldn’t find nowhere about nobody being born again. Said, ‘well, tell you, what I’ll go...I see Nicodemus...I seen him go walking up the streets and went up to Jerusalem...[Nicodemus goes to talk with Jesus]...said, ‘I know you’re a teacher.’ You ought to have been there, church...<sup>68</sup>

Davis went on to narrate the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, one that revealed Nicodemus’ educated ignorance and Jesus’ mystical wisdom. Davis added the diploma and library details to the story, details that evoked a literate culture of formal education. That education, though, was not the same as divinely granted wisdom, wisdom spread by a wandering oral teacher—and granted to receptive, humble souls in the present.

In these standardized themes, in the oral form that was the centerpiece of the church service, rural preachers did articulate independent and critical thoughts on power relations in the New South. They held up the reviled and persecuted Jesus as the model to follow and imitate, unmasked authority or superiority based in wealth, and showed up the officially educated as pretentious and ignorant. This was a genuine contrast to the bourgeois Protestant ethos in the New South (see chapter 3), one that imagined an easy and complementary relation between Christianity and society, a “Christian civilization;” that viewed poverty as a badge of immorality and degeneracy; and that distanced itself from “simple” and “primitive” religious ideas and imagined them as in need of heavy enlightenment. Howard Thurman argued in *Jesus and the Disinherited* that Christianity took on special meaning for the lowly and poor, that Jesus and the

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<sup>68</sup> Archive of Folk Culture AFS 5202A-5203B

early Christians lived on the margins of Roman society. The oral nature of rural Protestantism in the New South, its thin and breachable line between past and present, is the clue to how certain themes became regularized. They resonated because they spoke to everyday realities in the lives of the poor, and once framed into oral formula they gained a durable means for circulation and perpetuation.

Exploring these orally articulated themes and their semiotic resistance sheds light on something even more elusive but arresting in its critique of New South patterns: gestures. In their collection *Diversities of Gifts: Field Studies in Southern Religion*, folklorists Ruel Tyson, James Peacock, and Daniel Patterson argue that “gesture,” defined as an enactment of meaning containing both belief and ritual, is the elementary form of religious life. But Ong argues that gestures only have meaning within already established oral speech systems, that a pattern of orally articulated ideas makes sense of and establishes meaning for non-oral communication.<sup>69</sup> Three gestures, all gaining meaning from the orally transmitted narratives of the Bible, indicate other ways in which rural Protestants presented a vision of life that did critique everyday patterns in the New South.

Rev. Renfrew, the elderly black preacher that Alan Lomax interviewed in the late 30s, had experienced considerable racial violence in his youth in Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma. His father had worked hard, saved money, and bought a farm that he was able to leave to his children. But whites terrorized his sister and her family, drove them off the land, and seized it. Renfrew had also seen lynchings as a boy, and they left a deep and enduring impression on him. He told Lomax, “You might think that a man never would get over those feelins. Well, they *are* mighty deep-seated and they stay with you a long time. But when a man comes to be a real Christian, brother, he’ll get out of feelin like that. It’ll all leave you. The Bible tells you, “Pray

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<sup>69</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 7

for them that do despitefully use you and say all manner of evil against you, for My name's sake." Renfrew then steered into a meditation. "When I look out on His creation, I see white deers, black deers, and all different colors. I see the same in cows. I see the same in hogs. Then I look out on the earth and I see the earth that He made and I see flowers comin—some red, some blue, some white—all comin up on the same ground. It's a mystery to me, but it's God. And He must mean for us to live together. He must have meant it so...if you want a beautiful bouquet, you must get flowers of all colors and bring them together, and that makes a bouquet beautiful. We can't gather all white flowers or all red or blue; but we'll gather flowers of all different colors and blend them all together, and then we'll have a beautiful bouquet."<sup>70</sup>

Will Campbell, who grew up in a white small farm family in Amite County, Mississippi in the 20s and 30s, recalled his grandfather in his 1977 memoir. "Grandpa Bunt" was a Baptist deacon who lived a long life of manual labor, raising seventy-one crops. In his life he had also known profound suffering. "In his middle twenties," his grandson recalled of his grandfather's first marriage, "he had buried his entire family of children within a two week period." Campbell also recalled that Grandpa Bunt "prayed long and pretty prayers about stooping to drink from the bitter springs of life, and talked publicly with God about all the bad times." One time his grandfather took his sons to see a public hanging, an event that in story form was passed down to Campbell at a young age. He and his brother concluded that Grandpa Bunt had done it as "sort of a lesson against a life of crime," stark but educational. But "later, when we were grown," Campbell wrote, "and the exposure to the man who was Grandpa Bunt was complete, we knew that we had been wrong. We came to know him as a man who opposed violence in any form and

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<sup>70</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Rainbow Sign* 174, 177

for any reason, no matter the justification or provocation. More likely he was saying, ‘The world is this way but it should not be.’”<sup>71</sup>

Lloyd Chandler had been a notoriously violent man in his youth, before his vision of Death in a barn loft abruptly changed him. In his mid-twenties, in the wake of that vision, Chandler became a preacher and would often sing dramatically of his “Conversation with Death.” Later in life, in his mid-fifties, Chandler had another vision, this one rooted in rhythms of daily agriculture. Chandler was a small farmer and raised vegetables. Moles frequented his garden and nibbled away on the roots of the crops. To maintain his food, Chandler would watch as the moles moved through their tunnels and would stomp them out from above. He killed “many, many of them,” his son Garrett recalls, but

He had a dream or vision one night of going into a molehill. And he was captured by a bunch of moles. And he was able to understand their language. And they had put him in something like a holding cell, and moles would come by with little moles and say, tell their children, ‘Look. This is the man that killed your father,’ or ‘your mother.’ And he said that they were very, very *ill* with him, you know...and that they kept him there for a certain length of time. And that they would feed him, you know, but they were very ill with him...And then, one morning, he said, that they came and got him and took him into like a big room, sort of like a courtroom, but in there, they had like a queen or a king mole, a-sitting up on a pedestal in a big chair, with a crown on. And that they were going to try him for the murders that he had committed against them: all the moles that he had killed in his time. And they were all a-wanting to just dispose of him. Do away with him, in other words. Like we would be in a trial, and they would want to kill us. But the queen mole, somehow or another, had got—Dad said they had got together and she had talked to them, and he could see their little hands a-moving, and they’d look at him, and they’d look at her, and he said that when that was over, she asked him, said, ‘If we would let you go, would you promise that you would never kill another mole?’ And he said he promised that he would never kill another mole as long as he lived.<sup>72</sup>

Chandler kept his promise. For the last three decades of his life, he watched moles move through their tunnels, dug into the ground and captured them, and carried them two miles into the

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<sup>71</sup> Will Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* 3-4, 21

<sup>72</sup> Carl Lindahl, ed. *American Folktales from the Collections of the Library of Congress* 440-441

mountainous woods on a rugged path he had blazed. There he released them under the dogwood tree that also served as his secluded praying spot.

These gestures make sense insofar as there was language attending them, whether Chandler's story of his vision, Grandpa Bunt's long public prayers, or Rev Renfrew's extrapolation on a biblical command and his verbal musings on patterns in nature. Or do they? Carrying moles to one's praying ground, taking one's sons to see a hanging, making a beautiful bouquet as a sign of a different order—and for that matter, simply telling stories about Jesus and the rich man, Jesus and Nicodemus, Jesus the Man of Sorrows—do all these amount to an independent vision on the dynamics of power in the New South?

It's an old and long established trope that though their class position in the New South did not differ considerably, poor rural whites and blacks were kept at odds through the pervasive culture of white supremacy. This was W.J. Cash's "proto-Dorian bond:" even the poorest of whites derived consolation from the fact that they were white, and thus they linked themselves imaginatively to members of their own race, finding greater connection with the white landlord in town than with their black neighbor 200 yards down the dirt road. Richard Wright mused on this strange dynamic in his "folk history" of rural blacks: "Sometimes, fleetingly, like a rainbow that comes and vanishes in its coming, the wan faces of the poor whites make us think that perhaps we can join our hands with them and lift the weight of the Lords of the Land off our backs. But, before new meanings can bridge the chasm that has long been created between us, the poor whites are warned by the Lords of the Land that they must cast their destiny with their own color, that to make common cause with us is to threaten the foundations of civilization. Fear



breeds in our hearts until each poor white face begins to look like the face of an enemy soldier.”<sup>73</sup>

This chapter and the past three have not been focused on race relations among the rural poor, nor have they sought to compile evidence to test the proto-Dorian bond in the rural South. They have demonstrated, though, that in their own religious lives, the poor of both races shared ideas with each other far more than either did with propertied members of their own race. The best evidence indicates that rural whites and blacks did not regularly attend one another’s churches (although there was more interracial attendance than one would think—see chapter 3). They did, however, circulate and share central images and ideas, through elusive, hard to trace, but powerful oral forms of communication. Insofar as these ideas and images were interiorized, poor whites and poor blacks *did* enter an imaginative world with each other. Historians have long noted the interracial borrowings in another elusive medium, music, and awareness to the oral or aural nature of this should be an entry-point into exploring the interracial borrowings in another orally-transmitted phenomenon, religion.

This is not an argument that in the midst of the Jim Crow era, rural whites and blacks got along like the flowers in Renfrew’s bouquet. I have not compiled evidence on everyday race relations in the rural New South, but rather sought to explore the basic themes in a rural Protestantism that crossed the color line. I have tried to show that this religious culture had considerable depth and power in people’s lives, that it bears closer examination, and that its human pathos needs to be imagined into historical narratives that treat more familiar subjects. That the proto-Dorian bond was pervasive can become too self-evident for historians, inhibiting any suggestion that other cultural messages—say, those of religion—might have also possessed considerable power in people’s lives. Several years ago at the beginning of this project, I talked

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<sup>73</sup> Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* 46

with a rising young historian. She studies “new” political history, had mined the extensive papers of Lyndon Johnson, and had grown up in a south Georgia town some twenty-five miles up the road from my grandfather’s home. She asked what I was working on, and I floated my idea, a hunch at the time, that in their religious lives the poor of both races might have arrived at certain commonalities. To this tentative suggestion she offered a curt dismissal. “Well I’ll be interested to see if you can prove that,” she said as a reprimand, and walked away to join another conversation.

The reader can judge whether or not I have been able to do that, or to at least suggest that another culture, a rural religious culture, might have competed with the culture of white supremacy for a hold on people’s imaginations. Evidence from an oral culture of poor people is not easy to accumulate. Nor, I think, would the strange gestures of a Renfrew, Bunt, or Chandler pass muster as hard proof of social critique. We want tangible results, not elusive symbols. In this we may not realize our own contingency in a culture of literacy. Walter Ong contrasts the “empathetic and participatory” mode of orality with the “objectively distanced” one of literacy.<sup>74</sup> Gestures and their oral articulation seek to draw us into the story, to enter their imaginative world—not to stand outside as a neutral observer waiting for the punch line.

Yet if we move into the stories for a moment, we can see “real world” social effects on a very personal level. Take Chandler’s gesture, certainly the most cryptic of the three examples. In his youth Chandler was a notoriously violent man, the southern type that W.J. Cash eloquently described. He was also, his descendants recall, a very poor man. The violence that Chandler enacted was more than just a personality trait; it was a social manifestation of what St. Augustine called *curvatus in se*, his definition of evil as “curving in on itself.” Sociologists have established that violence among the poor and oppressed makes sense as a parasitic phenomenon. Having

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<sup>74</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 45

suffered—the confinement of poverty, actual violence, ridicule, frustration, injustice—the powerless are tempted to recapitulate these patterns, directing them not against the powerful but rather among themselves and those with even less power. Journalist Fox Butterfield has traced these cycles of violence from Edgefield County, South Carolina to the streets of New York in his 1995 work *All God's Children: The Bosket Family and the American Tradition of Violence*. Chandler was perpetuating this cycle in his early life, before his vision of Death put fear in his heart and revealed to him how tenuous and fragile his life was. His second vision, the enigmatic one of the moles, pushed him to repudiate violence of any sort, to instead offer an egregious display of pacifism and harmony.

Chandler's ritual act of carrying moles to his praying ground for three decades did not change the world. It did change Chandler himself. And it offered a different picture of what the world could be—built not on violence and assertion but on humility and charity. Turning Campbell's phrase around, Chandler's gesture said "the world is not this way but it should be." It may be that like Chandler's ritual act, rural Protestantism presented a picture that was an intimation, not a full realization, a vision of life that never actually changed the structures of power in the New South, or challenged the culture of white supremacy. In a world of minimal options, poor people of both races worked with the cultural materials they inherited, and the tangible effects of their religion may be solely in the little details of everyday life. But the power and depth of their intimation bears examination.

## CHAPTER 8

### W.J., JOHNNY, AND THE NATURE OF STRUGGLE

It's a familiar plotline to the student of Southern history: the hell-raising man, the flagrant sinner and study in excess, is rescued through the sympathetic love of a pious and self-controlled woman. Domesticated and tamed, the man repudiates his former lifestyle and joins the company of the righteous. In *The Mind of the South*, W.J. Cash wrote of the "old cleft in the Southern psyche," the antithetical struggle in the white male mind between "hedonism" and "Puritanism."<sup>1</sup> Ted Ownby imagined Cash's model into his study of the New South, where a "male culture" of competition, assertiveness, and recreation clashed with and was ultimately tamed in basic ways by a predominantly female "evangelical culture" of respectable self-control.<sup>2</sup> Country music's leading historian, Bill Malone, has applied Cash's dualism to his own analysis of the influence of southern Protestantism on the musical culture of commercial country music, particularly as performers left the fading rural world and confronted the allurements of an emerging Sunbelt society.<sup>3</sup>

This model is often applied to Johnny Cash's life. Numerous interpreters, from Pentecostal writer Charles Paul Conn in his 1973 *The New Johnny Cash* to Cash's leading biographer Michael Streissguth, in his edited 2002 collection *Ring of Fire* and his 2006

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<sup>1</sup> W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage, 1941):59-60,136

<sup>2</sup> Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South 1865-1920*

<sup>3</sup> Bill Malone, "The Rural South Moves to the City: Country Music Since World War II" in Douglas Hurt, ed. *The Rural South Since World War Two* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1998):107; Bill Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class* 117; Bill Malone, *Country Music USA* 17. More broadly, Malone argues that "country music has been subjected to no greater influence than southern religious life, which affected both the nature of songs and the manner in which they were performed. Country music evolved in a society where religion was pervasive and where the church and its related functions touched the individual's life in a hundred different ways." *Country Music USA* 10

biography, have framed Cash's life in these terms, contrasting the "wild S.O.B." of the 1960s (as one Nashville friend called Cash) with the domesticated Christian who emerged in the early 1970s.<sup>4</sup> The 2005 film *Walk the Line* did not depart significantly from this model, concluding in 1968 with a happy ending and sense of harmonious completion: deliverance from addiction, marriage to June Carter, and reconciliation with father Ray. More broadly, against the backdrop of country music's history, Bill Malone argues that "Cash appears to have been the first country singer to be identified as a bad boy," notes his 1960s reputation as "being a hell-raiser who got drunk, trashed hotel rooms, and played violent practical jokes," and argues that "in classic redemptive fashion, Cash first descended to the depths of despair and degradation...before finding personal salvation through the loving devotion and support of his wife June Carter Cash."<sup>5</sup>

This "classic redemptive fashion," as chapter 4 argued, is a historical product, not a timeless vision. This model of redemption does fit the bourgeois Protestant ethos that emerged in the late nineteenth century South, it applies in modified form to the Pentecostal movement that began around the turn of the century but only exploded after World War II, and it also applies, in a less gendered and more pietistic way, to the postwar Neo-Evangelicals who have come to dominate the public face of Protestantism in the United States. It does not match the rural Protestant sense of perpetual, inward struggle, one waged by both men and women in the hidden terrain of the soul. This chapter argues that this latter sense, the one that Cash absorbed in his childhood, did decisively inform his music and his artistic presentation of himself. There, he depicted not a struggle between the dual poles of male hedonism and female Puritanism, but rather an internal dialectic, where the life-granting power of God struggled with the

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Dearmore, "First Angry Man of Country Singers" *New York Times Magazine* 9/21/69 in Michael Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire: A Johnny Cash Reader* 104

<sup>5</sup> Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin'* 111,137-138

disintegrating and destructive power of the Devil. Like the rural Protestant ethos of his childhood, this was a darker vision of life, one of perpetual exposure to trouble and a denial of completion and harmony in this life, and it imagined a humble sense of human insufficiency as the *via negativa* to apprehending God's power. Narratives of dual poles and the achievement of harmony will surely continue to circulate as the story of Cash's life, perhaps most basically because they satisfy an urge for clarity, but in his music Cash told a more ambiguous and complicated story. The notable popularity of the specific musical products in which Cash evoked this ambiguity, the 1994 album *American Recordings* and the 2003 video "Hurt," are testament to a different impulse in the culture, one that embraces a dialectical view of human beings and, as folklorist Carl Lindahl puts it in his interpretation of the lore surrounding Lloyd Chandler, "override[s] the accepted chronology through which godlessness ultimately transforms itself into good."<sup>6</sup>

There's no doubt that Cash was a "wild S.O.B." in the 1960s, and stories of his egregious violence and heavy pill consumption circulated widely in country music circles, and to a lesser extent, in national pop culture. "His is the name most often called on the envy-ridden 'grape vine' which flourishes in the Nashville jungle," journalist Dixie Deen wrote in January 1966 in Nashville's leading trade journal *Music City News*.<sup>7</sup> Cash was the cover story and subject of a long interview in an extensive treatment rare for an industry journal.<sup>8</sup> This came on the heels of three notorious incidents in 1965. On a solitary fishing trip in June, Cash accidentally started a fire in California's Los Padres National Forest, home to endangered condors. The fire burned over 500 acres, and the federal government sued Cash for damage to this fragile habitat. At his deposition he was stoned and unrepentant. "I don't give a damn about your yellow buzzards.

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<sup>6</sup> Carl Lindahl, "Thrills and Miracles: Legends of Lloyd Chandler" 141

<sup>7</sup> *Music City News* 1/66

<sup>8</sup> I surveyed *Music City News* from its beginning in 1963 to 1974.

Why should I care?," he barked.<sup>9</sup> In October federal narcotics agents arrested Cash in El Paso for smuggling some 1100 pills (Dexedrine and Equanil) back from Juarez. Cash spent a night in the El Paso jail, and in the courtroom the next day "hissed at reporters" and tried to kick a photographer. Released on bond, he was escorted out in handcuffs, and a photograph of his departure was widely circulated in the national press.<sup>10</sup> Shortly afterwards, in Nashville for a show at the Grand Ole Opry, Cash appeared on stage "drugged out of his mind." He fumbled with the microphone on the first song, and in a fit of rage dragged the microphone stand across the stage and smashed all the fifty or so footlights, sending broken glass shards into the audience. He promptly drove June Carter's Cadillac wildly through a blinding rain on the Nashville streets until he hit a utility pole head-on, broke his nose and smashed his teeth, and huddled in the car as live wires hit the wet street. "It looked like Christmas or hell," he remembered in his 1997 memoir, "take your pick, a warm fiery glow all around the car."<sup>11</sup>

In the shadow of the El Paso arrest and its wide publicization of Cash's heavy drug use, Deen's feature opened with a curious and terse story: at a revival at a small church in the Missouri Ozarks, a man offered a long prayer of supplication for the troubled Cash. In the interview itself, Cash floated his idea of traveling to Israel to record an album to be called *The Holy Land*, for which he intended to write songs and dialogue in the style of his travelogue-concept albums *Ride This Train* (1960) and *Ballads of the True West* (1965).<sup>12</sup> He spoke at length about his brother Jack's profound influence on him, and allowed Deen to quote a rather personal poem he had written called "The Cost in Life." "...And why my Maker lets me live,"

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too: The Life of Johnny Cash* 171-172; Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 203-206

<sup>10</sup> Wren 177-178; Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash: The Biography* 128-129

<sup>11</sup> Marshall Grant with Chris Zar, *I Was There When It Happened: My Life with Johnny Cash* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2006):139; Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* 66-67; Cash with Carr, *Cash* 223-226

<sup>12</sup> In the spring of 1968, on the heels of *At Folsom Prison*'s massive success, Columbia gave Cash the go-ahead for this project.

Cash wrote, “why He gives the things He gives/ for I don’t follow many rules/ I often walk the way of fools...Why does He not ‘snuff’ me out?/ for I don’t know what life’s about/ the debt I owe for sin is high/ still He lets me live, love, work, and die.”<sup>13</sup>

Juxtapositions like this—a drug addict with criminal charges hoping to musically evoke “the Holy Land” and wondering why God did not snuff him out—are credible in a certain context. That context is not the bourgeois Protestantism of the New South that imagined clear and unambiguous moral distinctions and a code of upright respectability, and that continued to have definite regional influence into the 1950s and 60s.<sup>14</sup> Rather, it is that of the rural Protestantism that articulated a perpetual internal struggle and the confession of one’s own utter insufficiency as the *via negativa* to God. Bill Malone argues that commercial country music, certainly into the 1970s, retained the distinct imprint of the rural, working-class southern past: most performers and listeners came from or had family roots in that past, and themes in the music were shaped by a definite socioeconomic experience.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, “in a society where the open display of emotion is sublimated or considered to be in bad taste,” Malone argues, “country music is denigrated as ‘soap opera’ or worse. The country writers show no reluctance to discuss the pain, disappointment, and insecurity that sometimes touch everyone’s life.”<sup>16</sup> Malone also argues that “the ‘southernness’ of country music nowhere more dramatically asserts itself than in the powerful role exerted upon its style and content by Protestant evangelical religion.”<sup>17</sup> Taken together, Malone’s arguments do shed light on the context in which stories of Cash

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<sup>13</sup> *Music City News* 1/66 p22

<sup>14</sup> The endurance of this into the mid-60s is one of Samuel Hill’s principal arguments in *Southern Churches in Crisis*. For an excellent evocation of this ethos in urban black Protestant life, see Taylor Branch’s portrait of the opposition towards Vernon Johns’ radicalism and country manners in *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988)

<sup>15</sup> This is a running argument in *Country Music USA*. See also *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’* and “The Rural South Moves to the City”

<sup>16</sup> *Country Music USA* 301

<sup>17</sup> *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’* 89



circulated through the Nashville grape vine even as he also voiced religious longings. That context was one informed by the southern rural past, where open display of emotion, particularly religious emotion, would not have been “bad taste,” nor would their juxtaposition with the darker side of life have met with incredulity. In a rather different setting, but with the same religious ethos in mind, Flannery O’Connor noted that her characters with their passionate longings for redemption and struggles with the darker side of life were, in the context of mainstream national culture in the 1950s and 60s, very much in bad taste. They were “freaks,” she said in a 1960 college lecture, “grotesque characters [who] seem to carry an invisible burden.”<sup>18</sup> That invisible burden was their cultural inheritance from the southern past, in which, as chapter 4 argued, rural Protestants had not “pushed everything dark and dangerous to the rim of one’s life,” but had instead named that darkness and imagined a perpetual and passionate internal struggle against it.

Cash’s own late-in-life reflections on the wild days of his youth reveal the continued power of this sensibility. In his 1997 autobiography, he was at pains to de-romanticize the wildness and depict it as a dark struggle with destruction. “It’s disturbing,” he wrote pointedly, “to confront the fact that, in many eyes, the kind of motel vandalism I pioneered is now a kind of totem of rock ‘n’ roll rebellion, a harmless and even admirable mixture of youthful exuberance and contempt for convention. That’s not what it was for me. It was darker and deeper. It was *violence*.”<sup>19</sup> He recounted a dark story of the time that, driving stoned, he plowed his ’58 Cadillac into a huge palm tree on a bend in the road near Coldwater Canyon in California. He jumped out of the car just in time to save himself, rolled across the road, and watched as the Cadillac (in which he had been hauling a leaking propane tank) exploded into pieces. Later, in the hospital being treated for burns, he was visited by a friend and his pregnant wife. They were

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<sup>18</sup> Flannery O’Connor, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” in Sally Fitzgerald, ed. *Flannery O’Connor: Collected Works* 817

<sup>19</sup> Cash with Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 209

both badly disturbed at Cash's appearance, and that night the woman suffered a miscarriage. Cash wrote with emphasis, "you might have been thinking my wrecks were pretty amusing in a live-fast, die-young, hell-bent kind of way. What *I* think is that the life inside that woman was too young to die. I also think it's a good idea to dwell on the literal meaning of 'hell-bent'."<sup>20</sup>

But, as chapter 3 asked, did Cash ever find a way to convey this darkness, this struggle with the Devil and Hell that was intrinsic to the rural Protestant vision of the Christian's life, in his music? Even granting what Malone argued about the rural southern character of both country performers and listeners, there were definite institutional constraints on religious expression. David Sanjek notes that RCA Victor A&R director Ralph Peer was vital in codifying segregated genres of "country" and "blues" in the 1920s. Though the musicians he recorded, most notably Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, had eclectic tastes that crossed the color line, Peer didn't want that. Peer separated Rodgers from his regular accompanists because, to him, "the records would have been no good if Jimmie had sung with this group for he was singing nigger blues and they were doing old-time fiddle music. Oil and water...they just don't mix."<sup>21</sup> One firm imposition Peer did *not* make was to separate religious songs from those treating various human dramas; the Carter Family were not typecast as simply "gospel" singers, and their recorded repertoire (1927-1942) captures a wide variety of themes, from the transcendent hope of "No Depression in Heaven" to the romantic pain of "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes."

With the development of the LP in 1948, however, the national record companies did begin to discreetly separate religious music from that evoking other elements of life. The Louvin Brothers, who recorded commercially from 1947 to 1963 and were a major influence on Cash in his later years in Dyess, found a double-edged sword when they signed with powerful Capitol

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<sup>20</sup> Cash with Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 206-207

<sup>21</sup> David Sanjek, "All the Memories Money Can Buy: Marketing Authenticity and Manufacturing Authorship" working draft in author's possession

Records in 1952. On the one hand they gained national distribution and exposure, while on the other they lost a measure of artistic control and were slotted into the role of gospel singers. Their religious expression was, as Charles Wolfe's biography demonstrates, heartfelt, but they also fought with the label to record non-gospel material. After three years, Capitol relented, and when their first non-gospel single also became their first single to enter the Billboard country charts, surely Capitol executives found financial wisdom in the decision. However, all Louvin Brothers LPs reflected the hand of the company's genre separation. All religious material was packaged together on albums like *The Family Who Prays* (1958) and *Satan is Real* (1959), while "secular" songs about mistreatment and human breakdown were put together for albums like *Tragic Songs of Life* (1959).<sup>22</sup> Obviously, on the receiving end, the listener could blur these industry divisions and get a more complete sense of the artistic vision behind the music, but the divisions did make it more difficult, both imaginatively and commercially, for musicians who wanted to articulate the dialectical ethos of rural Protestantism.

These industry divisions were there when Cash recorded his first gospel album for Columbia, 1959's *Hymns by Johnny Cash*, his second album for the label. Cash's move from Memphis-based Sun Records, where he had recorded from 1955 to 1958, was a chance for greater profit on a national label with significant distributive power, but Columbia's greater resources also mattered to Cash because they allowed him to pursue his interests in historical concept albums and to record gospel songs, some inherited and some of his own composition.<sup>23</sup> A few gospel songs appeared here-and-there on regular albums—"That's Enough" on *The Fabulous Johnny Cash* (1958) and "The Great Speckled Bird" on *Songs of Our Soil* (1959)—but the general rule was that religious songs appeared in a separate package from those singing of

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Wolfe, *In Close Harmony: The Story of the Louvin Brothers*

<sup>23</sup> Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 91,95

loss and suffering, of the down-and-out and those ignored by the larger society. Billing modern gospel songs as “hymns” also gave the album a feel of detached antiqueness. Still, of the *Hymns by Johnny Cash* album, bass player Marshall Grant recalls that Cash “showed tremendous interest” and that he “worked feverishly,” even as by 1959 he was addicted to pills and already gaining a reputation in country circles for acts of motel vandalism like setting five hundred baby chickens loose and exploding toilets and pipes with cherry bombs.<sup>24</sup> Grant further writes that “getting to do a gospel album was a high point in John’s life, and it had a tremendous effect on him. After we recorded it, he sort of turned in a different direction”—but not for long. By the early 60s, Grant recalls, the Johnny Cash that he knew intimately through their breakneck touring was “a terribly unhappy man.”<sup>25</sup> June Carter corroborated this memory in her 1979 memoir *Among My Klediments*. “I remember a time during the rough years when we were in concert in Duluth, Minnesota, and I knew what a troubled man Johnny Cash was. That night I watched him from my motel window as he walked along the shores of the lake. As the sun began to rise the next morning, I went to the window and could see him still walking, carrying a burden only he knew...There are so many things I could tell about those years—the sleepless nights...the wrecks, the pain, the hurt. He should have died a thousand times from an overdose or a wreck.”<sup>26</sup> At a personal level, the religious affirmations he sang of seemed to elude him, even as at an artistic level, Cash was not finding a way to connect his typical musical themes of destructive violence, loss, and limit—brilliantly evoked on songs like “Folsom Prison Blues,” “Don’t Take Your Guns to Town,” and “I Still Miss Someone”—with the dialectical Protestant vision he had absorbed in his youth, one that did engage with and name precisely such dark phenomena.

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<sup>24</sup> Marshall Grant with Chris Zar, *I Was There When It Happened* 85; Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 86

<sup>25</sup> Grant with Zar 85,97

<sup>26</sup> June Carter Cash, *Among My Klediments* 84-86

In what is really an aside in his study of the early country blues, ethnographer Jeff Todd Tilton makes a perceptive insight about the “pathology” of “modern country singers.” Writing in the late 70s, Tilton argued that their “mixture of religion, alcoholism, and divorce bespeaks an extraordinary cultural breakdown.”<sup>27</sup> What Tilton is getting at, I think, is not the rural dialectical view that named trouble and sought to confront it, but rather a severe impasse, a religious inheritance that survives from the past with some force but has lost the resources to speak to the problems that confront people in their present everyday lives. There is thus a wild and exaggerated fluctuation between longing for religious deliverance and imprisonment to forces that sever human connection, but the rival forces demonstrate schizophrenia, not engagement. This point is highly germane. As a generation of rural-born southerners encountered significantly greater possibilities for employment and consumption in the 1950s and 60s, did the religion they learned as children possess cultural resources for speaking to trouble in new forms, the troubles of loss of local community, navigation of the cornucopia of consumption, and the shock of the rapid transition from New South rural poverty to rising Sunbelt prosperity—or did it show the “cultural breakdown” that Tilton saw? Did it become simple nostalgia, or did its vision of perennial trouble contain resources to name trouble in a new guise? In Cash we can see these issues in exaggerated form.

Cash recorded two more gospel albums in the wild 1960s, *Hymns from the Heart* (1962) and, as he had expressed hope about in the *Music City News* story, *The Holy Land* (1968). While these were not markers of pure cultural breakdown, their genre separation indicated a running division between (present) wild life and (past) religious vision. Though the country audience could accept both as legitimate, how the two might engage with each other remained elusive. It was on an old song from the more distant past, “Were You There When They Crucified My

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<sup>27</sup> Jeff Todd Tilton, *Early Downhome Blues* 185

Lord?” that George Jackson traced back to 1880s Tennessee, that Cash came closest to evoking the trouble of his life *in* religious song. He recorded the song in 1962, and it appears along with the newer and much-covered gospel number “Peace in the Valley” on the 1963 compilation *Ring of Fire: The Best of Johnny Cash*. But in the mid-60s, Cash developed the song into a major feature of his stage show, with an antiphonal style that fused the choral singing of the Carter Family and the Statler Brothers with his own low baritone and the crisp alto of Anita Carter.<sup>28</sup> This antiphonal style, and an instrumentation sparse even by the minimalist standards of the Tennessee Three, heightened the isolation of Cash and Carter’s voices and accentuated a tone of lamentation, loss, and estrangement. Cash evoked his own troubled feelings in and through his adapted version of this folk narrative meditation on the crucifixion. In a 1969 feature on Cash’s performances, critic Richard Goldstein noted this complicated personalization, and wrote that “when Johnny Cash sings a hymn, you get this very solitary search for grace. And it’s that same quality of struggle resolved, or deferred, or verging on agony that transforms just about everything he sings into what you feel when you’re alone in a new room. That’s a kind of aloneness The Beatles never touch.”<sup>29</sup> Folklorist Frederick Danker argued in 1972 that “the blending of all parts of the troupe in rousing gospel songs represents the most highly sophisticated ensemble work in country music today.”<sup>30</sup>

The ensemble work of Cash’s stage shows and his investment of old gospel songs with modern meaning were artistic breakthroughs, and his highly successful live albums *At Folsom Prison* (1968) and *At San Quentin* (1969) captured the live show he had developed in the 60s even as their prison setting enriched the meanings of the closing gospel numbers. In the wake of

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<sup>28</sup> Frederick Danker, “The Repertory and Style of a Country Singer” 324; Larry Linderman, “Penthouse Interview: Johnny Cash” *Penthouse* August 1975 in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 152; Richard Skanse, *Rolling Stone* 6/30/00

<sup>29</sup> Richard Goldstein, “Something Rude Showing” *Vogue* 8/15/69 in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 89

<sup>30</sup> Danker 329

these twin albums, Cash's imagination was enlivened, and he found creative ways to fuse the countercultural ferment with his own inherited religious vision, particularly in his 1971 song "Man in Black" and his 1973 film *The Gospel Road*. (The prison albums and this countercultural fusion will be discussed in the next chapter). These were rich artistic statements, and they did demonstrate the opposite of the cultural breakdown Titon argued for: past religious vision and present cultural reality engaged with one another.

In those same years, at some point in 1969-1973, Cash discussed with friend and fellow country singer Marty Robbins his idea of a intimately personal album, one in which he would be accompanied solely by his own acoustic guitar and would sing to the public the songs that he sang to himself in his most solitary moments. He wanted to call the album *Late and Alone*, and it had the potential promise of succinctly evoking the different aspects of Cash's persona.<sup>31</sup> Cash found resistance from Columbia, as he had on some of his other ideas (he argued for a live prison album for five or six years in the 1960s before new A&R director Bob Johnston gave the green light in late 1967).<sup>32</sup> While the *Late and Alone* idea percolated in his mind and he argued with his label, other problems entered the picture. Cash's live prison albums sold extremely well very quickly, as did subsequent albums *Hello, I'm Johnny Cash*, *The Johnny Cash Show* (both 1970), and *Man in Black* (1971), as did a variety of Columbia compilations and repacking of older material (even Sun Records began to reissue decade-old material in the wake of *Folsom*'s huge success). The company, which had given Cash a fair amount of artistic freedom in the 60s, began to exert greater control over his production and material in the 1970s.<sup>33</sup> Cash's already frenetic touring and public appearances increased heavily in the fifteen years after *At Folsom*, and

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<sup>31</sup> "Cash Unplugged" *Country Music* 8/94

<sup>32</sup> Johnny Cash, liner notes to *At Folsom Prison*; see also Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison: The Making of a Masterpiece*

<sup>33</sup> On changing levels of artistic control, see Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 96,115,193

Marshall Grant remembers that stopping to record with intense focus—a mood that the *Late and Alone* project seemed to demand—was simply not Cash’s driving motive in the 70s.<sup>34</sup> And, a number of Cash critics and biographers have argued, after his richly creative period in the late 60s and early 70s, Cash began to lose his own artistic vision. Though he wrote plenty of songs throughout the decade of the 70s and remained a major presence in country music, the magic that had marked his earlier work seemed to be missing. Journalist Patrick Carr argued that “messages from his own Muse just weren’t getting through” in the later 70s, and after 1972 only a handful of Cash singles reached the top of the country charts.<sup>35</sup> In 1992, after a dozen year period in which he wrote less than ever before and hit a commercial nadir, Cash was still talking about the unrealized *Late and Alone* idea. “I want to do an album of real ‘heart’ folk songs, or country songs, or love songs, mainly with just me and my guitar, and I want to call it *Johnny Cash Late and Alone*,” he told *Country Music* magazine.<sup>36</sup>

As the idea languished in the 70s and then into the next decades, the intimately personal musical treatment it might have given of Cash’s trouble, perhaps a religious engagement with and naming of that trouble, was bypassed by a sunnier and less ambiguous story. Told through the media of Neo-Evangelical mass meetings, in Pentecostal writer Charles Paul Conn’s 1973 *The New Johnny Cash*, by Cash himself in his 1975 *Man in Black*, even in a 1976 Spire Christian Comic treatment on Cash, this narrative emerged out of Cash’s involvement, beginning in 1970-71, with Neo-Evangelicals preachers like Billy Graham and James Robison, Neo-Evangelical group Youth for Christ, and the independent Pentecostal Evangel Temple church that Cash began to attend in Nashville. Essentially the story was a less regional, Neo-Evangelical version of W.J.

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<sup>34</sup> Grant with Zar, *I Was There When It Happened* 203,220,246

<sup>35</sup> Patrick Carr, “Johnny Cash: The Spirit is Willing” *Journal of Country Music* 20; Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Country Hits* 69

<sup>36</sup> Michael Bane, “Twenty Questions with Johnny Cash” *Country Music* 9/92



Cash's dualistic plot: though raised in the church and baptized into it at age twelve, Cash had fallen far away from its moral injunctions and for years in the 60s had been a wild hell-raiser. Emerging from drug addiction in late 1967 through the love of June Carter, Cash ultimately came to new life through a 1971 born-again experience at Evangel Temple. Subsequently re-baptized in the Jordan River by the Temple's pastor, Jimmy Snow (son of country singer Hank Snow), Cash was again in the ranks of the righteous, shunning profanity, alcohol, and drugs, and finding domestic bliss through marriage and fatherhood. The Neo-Evangelical Zondervan press advertised Cash's *Man in Black* as the story of "God's superstar," and in place of the older rural idea of perpetual struggle in the soul, with a very different mood than the somber "Were You There," was a narrative of unambiguous victory and sharp lines between the way of sinners and the way of saints. Freely willed, voluntary choice—not the insufficiency of the *via negativa*—was the route to God. As Cash himself wrote in the opening of *Man in Black*, "I was running from God and whatever He wanted me to do, but I knew I'd tire before He would, and I'd make the change before He gave up on me."<sup>37</sup> Or, as Neo-Evangelical group Campus Crusade for Christ tersely phrased it in a 70s advertising campaign, "I Found It!"

This narrative, generated in the early to mid-70s, became the dominant one of Cash's life (and remains strong into the present)—even as, in the late 70s, Cash relapsed into severe drug addiction, cheated on June Carter, and once again wrought considerable damage on himself and on those close to him.<sup>38</sup> Marshall Grant writes that "by 1979, drugs had become John's top priority," and goes on to reflect that by the summer of that year, "he was in terrible condition, as bad as I've ever seen any man at any time in my life. And it was getting to the point that he couldn't perform, couldn't do anything. He was just staying totally blown away all of the

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<sup>37</sup> Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* 5

<sup>38</sup> See Bill Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin'* 111; Steve Turner, *The Man Called Cash*; and Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* for this narrative

time...It's impossible to explain just how ridiculous John's behavior was."<sup>39</sup> Son John Carter Cash remembers that beginning in 1977, Cash was relapsing, and writes that "the forces of addiction and mental illness would shape my world for the next twenty years." His father hit an absolute nadir in 1983, and he thought that "the talented, alert, involved man I had known as a young child seemed gone forever."<sup>40</sup> Both Grant and John Carter came public with these ugly realities after Cash's death, in memoirs in 2006 and 2007. Likewise, official biographer Steve Turner described Cash's relapse in his 2004 *The Man Called Cash*. At the actual time, the real story did not make it to the public, except in the form of rumors and hearsay. Indeed, in 1979, the year that Grant lamented as rock bottom, Neo-Evangelical group Youth for Christ honored Cash with its Man of the Year award (in 1974 June Carter had received Youth for Christ's "Wife and Mother of the Year" award).<sup>41</sup> Also that year, Cash undertook his most extensive gospel music project, the double album *A Believer Sings the Truth*, for which he had to seek minor label distribution after Columbia rejected it. And, again in the Jordan River, he was baptized for the third time by Pentecostal minister John Cobaugh.<sup>42</sup> But the complete deliverance that the Neo-Evangelicals and Pentecostals imagined, and that Cash himself seemed to long for, was hardly the reality in his own life. Nor was past religious tradition (evident in old songs on *Believer Sings the Truth* like "Oh Come, Angel Band" and "Strange Things Happening Every Day") or present music (six new compositions for *Believer*) speaking to or reflecting personal experience. Perhaps this was cultural breakdown in heightened form.

In 1993, though, after over a decade of musical floundering and commercial near-invisibility, Cash made a major artistic breakthrough, finally recording the *Late and Alone* album

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<sup>39</sup> Grant with Zar, *I Was There When It Happened* 252,278,283

<sup>40</sup> John Carter Cash, *Anchored in Love: An Intimate Portrait of June Carter Cash* 70,99

<sup>41</sup> "Youth for Christ Salutes Cash" *Billboard* 91 (4/7/79):65; Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* 171

<sup>42</sup> Turner, *Man Called Cash* 163

idea that he had originated two decades earlier. On this work, more successfully than on anything before, he imagined the rural Protestant sense of perpetual struggle into his own life, framing the rival impulses evident in his personal and public life into a complicated, dialectical whole. Here, darkness was a perennial force in human life, always there and never allowing for clear victory or division of society into sinners and righteous. Paradoxically, as Cash summoned the cultural resources of the old rural South to craft a work speaking to present-day realities, winning a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Album in the process, the album was produced, marketed, and listened to largely outside country music circles.

The impetus for the album came from Rick Rubin, thirty year old producer and head of the decade-old American Recordings label (originally Def Jam, then Def American, then American). Rubin's label had primarily featured rap and heavy metal, but he had followed Cash's music and believed him to be a major artist who had been rendered creatively moribund. He explained in an interview after Cash's death that he was attracted not just by his music but even more so by his "overall persona," a "divided" persona in whom "there was clearly a side...that was spiritual and religious, and then there was another side that was dark and drug using. He really lived an extreme life, in different directions."<sup>43</sup> This sense of division, of a religion that struggled with a real dark side that was not simple fun or carefree wildness, was an insightful hunch and one that would provide fertile soil for Cash's artistic creation. After fairly brief negotiations with Cash and manager Lou Robin, Rubin signed Cash to the label and by May Cash was in Los Angeles to record initial demos, accompanied only by his own acoustic guitar.

Rubin gave Cash significant freedom to sing whatever songs were personally close to him, and as the tape machines rolled in Rubin's home studio, Cash sang and strummed a host of

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<sup>43</sup> Rick Rubin interviewed by Terri Gross on February 16, 2004 on National Public Radio

songs, the kind that he carried with him in the *Late and Alone* mode. Ultimately the sessions stretched on for three straight weeks, then continued in July, September, and December, with additional recording in Cash's own home studio at his Hendersonville home. This was far, far longer than Cash had ever given to the act of recording—the closest precedents were his concept albums of the 1960s, especially *Ride This Train* and *Ballads of the True West*, for which he undertook significant research but which were recorded in sessions of three (*Ride*) to six days (the double album *Ballads*).<sup>44</sup> This freedom to record at length was made possible by the huge financial success that Rubin's label had found in a decade (numerous multi-platinum albums) and by the relative absence of time-bound studio technicians and session musicians, but more importantly, at an artistic level, Rubin encouraged Cash to explore his own personal tastes at length, and Cash was clearly energized by the creative freedom. More so than on any recordings since the early 1970s, Cash's repertoire spanned eclectically and widely across the century, from the *memento mori* "In My Time of Dying" (also known as "Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed") to his own new composition "Redemption," from Jimmie Rodgers' "Hobo Bill's Last Ride" which he sang as a boy to Kris Kristofferson's "Why Me Lord," from the old and reworked murder ballad "Delia's Gone" to a new Cash composition about a Vietnam veteran, "Drive On."<sup>45</sup> Rubin also brought songs to Cash to try out, modern compositions like Glenn Danzig's "Thirteen" and Loudon Wainwright's "The Man Who Couldn't Cry."<sup>46</sup> Of this freewheeling, cornucopia approach to recording, Cash subsequently said that "I discovered my own self and what makes me tick musically and what I really like. It was really a great inward journey, doing all these

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<sup>44</sup> See dates of recording sessions in liner notes, *Ride This Train* Columbia/Legacy, 2002 and *Ballads of the True West* Columbia/Legacy, 2002. On Cash's research for his concept albums, see Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash* 263-265

<sup>45</sup> For the full set of songs, see John L. Smith, *Another Song to Sing: The Recorded Repertoire of Johnny Cash* (Lanham: Scarecrow, 1999)

<sup>46</sup> Steve Turner, *Man Called Cash* 195; Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 253

sessions over a period of nine months.”<sup>47</sup> “This time, no one mentioned budgets, it wasn’t like there was a clock on the wall, and I guess you might say this is the real me; it’s kind of dark in there.”<sup>48</sup> Whittled down to thirteen songs, without any instrumentation added, the resultant album achieved the *Late and Alone* idea that Cash had imagined two decades before. Its style was intimately personal and, as he indicated in interviews, it evoked the darkness in his life. Released April 1994, it was titled simply (and perhaps shrewdly on Rubin’s part) *American Recordings*.

The album opened with “Delia’s Gone,” an old folk ballad that Cash had recorded before, for his 1962 *The Sound of Johnny Cash*. The ballad was a first-person narrative of a cold-blooded killer who shot his woman, burned her clothes and drank her wine, and now was stuck in jail and broke rocks on the chain gang. The 1962 version was in a sardonic tone, the almost boastful recollection of an unrepentant bad man who easily dispensed with a woman who tried to behave like a “rolling stone.” The 1993 version, by contrast, was stark and somber, and here the killer told of how he felt threatened by Delia, how her “cold and mean” behavior made him want to grab his “submachine,” and how he tracked her down in Memphis, tied her to a chair, and shot her to death. Delia’s murder led to no bad man boasting, however—here he ruminated on the haunted power that Delia continue to have over him. Subsequent songs furthered this mood of somberly probing the darkness within. British songwriter (and former Cash son-in-law) Nick Lowe’s “The Beast in Me,” a song he had written about Cash over the course of the 1980s, became a very slowly rendered meditation in first person. Here the prison imagery was internal, that of a dangerous beast within who was barely kept at bay, whose raging pushed the narrator to plead “God help the beast in me.” The beast could be deeply deceptive, however, whispering to

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<sup>47</sup> Jancee Dunn, “Mr. Cool” *Rolling Stone* 685 (June 30, 1994):153

<sup>48</sup> Lisa Robinson, “Johnny Cashes in on His Dream” *New York Post* May 27, 1994:39

its jailkeeping host that it was safe to let out, even as observers saw that host stumbling around overcome by his darkness, oblivious to whether it was “New York or New Year.” In “Thirteen,” a song that rock musician Glenn Danzig brought to Cash at Rubin’s suggestion, a nameless narrator, known simply by the number tattooed on his neck, reflected on all the damage he had done. It had a dark, fated quality, for he was “born in the soul of misery,” and from that portentous beginning he looked back now on a destructive life in which “the list of lives I’ve broken reach from here to Hell.”

Other songs evoked personal confinement and longings to be free in a more externalized manner. “Drive On,” Cash’s composition inspired by his reading of a number of Vietnam veteran memoirs, told of a former soldier and his friend Whiskey Sam, men who could not help but recount the awful experiences they had been through, even as they counseled each other to forget the past, to “drive on” because “it don’t mean nothin’.” The query of how much freedom one could really find was there also on his moving rendition of Leonard Cohen’s “Bird on a Wire.” There a variety of rich images—a bird on a wire, a fish on a hook, a baby stillborn—evoked longings to be free in the midst of confinement, a confinement that the narrator himself had helped to create through tearing at everyone who reached out to him like a beast with a horn. He lamented that he had been “unkind” and “untrue” and promised weakly to “make it all up to thee.” On “Oh, Bury Me Not,” an old western folksong that Cash had first recorded for his 1965 *Ballads of the True West*, the chance of human reliability looked slim. There a young, dying cowboy pleaded with his companions not to bury him “on the lone prairie,” only to have his wish disregarded as they buried him “in a shallow grave/ just six by three.” The narrator on Cash’s composition “Let the Train Blow the Whistle” could enumerate requests for how his debts could be paid—but only after his death, when the train blew its whistle. His own postmortem future

looked grim. “Tell the gossipers and liars,” he asked his former partner-in-crime, “I will meet them in the fire.”

In the midst of these darker songs of human destruction and limitation, juxtaposed with them and scattered amongst them, were songs of hope for a divinely-given deliverance. On Kris Kristofferson’s “Why Me Lord”—a song that Kristofferson had written in 1971 when he attended Evangel Temple with Cash for a brief time—Cash sang a deeply humble prayer that begged for forgiveness.<sup>49</sup> The narrator ruminated on the hollow life he had led, wondered how he deserved any of the blessings he had received, and pleaded in the chorus, “Lord help me, Jesus, I’ve wasted it/ so help me, Jesus, I know what I am/ now that I know/ that I’ve needed you so/ help me, Jesus, my soul’s in your hand.” In Tom Waits’ “Down There by the Train,” another song that Rubin introduced to Cash, the narrator kept company with a rogues’ gallery that included Judas Iscariot and John Wilkes Booth. He was a bad man too, having forsaken those who cared about him and acknowledging that he was still “raising Cain.” They waited together for a train at a place where it slowed down to cross a river. But this train, like that of old songs “This Train is Bound for Glory” or “Little Black Train A-Comin,” was less an engine of commerce or transport than a symbol of hopeful spiritual reality. It slowed down for the rogues’ gallery of repentant criminals to hop on, because it had ample “room for the forsaken” and crossed the river at a special place “where the sinner can be washed in the blood of the Lamb.” Cash’s own “Redemption,” a remarkable and poetic original composition, meditated also on this blood, at the scene of the crucifixion. “From the hands it came down,” the song began, “from the side it came down/ from the feet it came down/ and ran to the ground.” From that ground grew a tree, the “tree of life,” and then “round the tree grew a vine/ on whose fruit I could dine.” This food was sustaining in the face of attacks of darkness: “my old friend Lucifer came/ fought to

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<sup>49</sup> Steve Turner, *Man Called Cash* 148

keep me in chains/ but I saw through the tricks/ of six sixty six.” The chorus repeated a cycle of life that began with the violence that Jesus suffered. “And the blood gave life/ to the branches of the life/ and the blood was the price/ that set the captives free/ and the numbers that came/ through the fire and the flood/ clung to the tree/ and were redeemed by the blood.” Juxtaposed with and on the heels of the other songs, those that drew on long-established Cash imagery of destructive bad men, of longings to be free from confinement, the Christianity expressed in songs like “Redemption,” “Why Me Lord,” and “Down There by the Train” was one that engaged with and was candid about the darkness in life. The redeemed came through fire and flood, and found rescue in clinging to the tree of life in the face of attacks of the Devil.

“Like a Soldier,” another sharp new Cash composition, followed “Redemption” and was transparent in its narrative evocation of Cash’s own life. Like many of the other songs, this was a rumination, an unsentimental reflection on past experience. The narrator recalled the “wild road” he had rambled, the nights he did not remember, how “a hundred times” he should have died. There was pain in the past, and in the present “darkest, secret memory” almost-forgotten faces appeared as accusations. But the past was not a prison. The chorus repeated that the narrator was “like a soldier getting over the war,” that he could struggle not to reenact the past behavior that troubled him. He was hopeful because “I don’t have to do that anymore.” The album closed on a seemingly light note, Loudon Wainwright’s novelty song “The Man Who Couldn’t Cry.” Cash was no stranger to the genre, having recorded a whole album of novelty songs, 1966’s *Everybody Loves a Nut*, and scoring #1 hits with “A Boy Named Sue” in 1969 and “One Piece at a Time” in 1976. On “Man Who Couldn’t Cry” the listener heard not just Cash and his guitar, but an audience, the hip crowd of Hollywood’s Viper Room (Cash’s cover of Jimmy Driftwood’s neo-folksong “Tennessee Stud,” a lightly-toned bad man ballad, was also recorded there). The song



told of a strange figure who displayed an unreal stoicism, who suffered in life and wound up in jail, but never once showed a single sign of breaking down. Theologians and doctors judged him to be an “insensitive beast.” Finally in a mental hospital, his own floodgates opened as it rained for forty days and forty nights. He cried the whole time, and on the 41<sup>st</sup> day, died of dehydration. Only then did the various sufferings and injustices he had endured find any restoration and completeness. In Cash’s treatment and in juxtaposition with the other songs of very different tone, the song became a satire of a bad man figure, accentuated by hoops and hollers from the audience. Penitence and sorrow for past, and self-effacing humor, were the path to healing the broken fragments of life.<sup>50</sup>

On this album on which he labored for nine months with Rubin, Cash achieved a level of artistic unity that had eluded him for several decades. From his earliest days auditioning gospel songs at Sun Records, Cash had a drive for religious expression, one that, as his own memoirs and the numerous statements by those who knew him testify, was both personal and artistic. On the *American Recordings* album he was able to weave this drive into a complicated whole with songs treating other regular themes of his, violent destruction and longings for a way out of personal confinement. As memoirs and others’ recollections also demonstrate, such themes were both artistic renditions and only a few steps away from Cash’s personal life. The juxtaposition of these two impulses, through a minimalist style that starkly presented only Cash and his acoustic guitar, framed these impulses not sequentially, but rather in persistent tension. Final victory was not a present reality but a future hope, one found through humble penitence and pleading for God’s rescue.

A final detail helped frame the album with a kind of serendipitous appropriateness. Photographer Andrew Earl was sent in winter 1994 to Australia, where Cash was then on tour, to

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<sup>50</sup> Johnny Cash, *American Recordings* American Recordings, 1994

shoot him for the album artwork. In his stark black clothing Cash seemed to Earl to be “a religious figure,” and for dramatic effect he positioned Cash and his guitar against a clouded sky, standing upright in front of a wheat field. Two little dogs were running around the locale in the Australian countryside, and at one moment they came up and sat on either side of Cash.<sup>51</sup> Unplanned and unintended, the resultant image became the cover art and, Cash stated in subsequent interviews, a symbolic scene that to him captured the spirit of the album. “You know my album cover with the two dogs on it?,” Cash volunteered at the close of a promotional interview with *Rolling Stone*’s Jancee Dunn, “I’ve given them names. Their names are Sin and Redemption. Sin is the black one with the white stripe; Redemption is the white one with the black stripe. That’s kind of the theme of that album, and I think it says it for me, too. When I was really bad, I was not all bad. When I was really trying to be good, I could never be all good. There would be that black streak going through.”<sup>52</sup>

As he elaborated in his 1997 memoir, where he favored the term “black dog,” the darkness in his life was not just youthful wildness (W.J. Cash’s “hedonism”), not just “bad” from which one could willfully refrain (as it was for New South bourgeois Protestants), not just a pre-conversion-experience state of being that one left behind (as it was for the Neo-Evangelicals and Pentecostals), but a constant and unpredictable assailant. The Christian was always torn between sin and redemption, and victory in this life was never secure. This vision was not unique to Cash *sui generis*—even though it personally resonated with his own struggles—but rather was entirely in accord with the rural Protestant ethos of his childhood, one that imagined a continual internal struggle between God and the Devil, the latter not a synonym for “bad” or “fun” but a dark and unpredictable power. It was the ethos that Cash himself evoked explicitly in his prepared

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<sup>51</sup> Steve Turner, *Man Called Cash* 200

<sup>52</sup> Jancee Dunn, “Mr. Cool” *Rolling Stone* 155

statement on his television show in November 1970, when he said, “all my life I have believed that there are two powerful forces...the force of God, and the force of the Devil,” and went on to describe his own fighting with the Devil (see chapter 4). But one did not need to see the TV show or to read the direct prose of promotional press or 1997 memoir to find that dialectical vision. It was evoked poetically and artistically in the delicately crafted *American Recordings* album that drew on an older religious sensibility, even as it was both indebted to and shed light on images of Cash’s public persona that had been shaped in a very different context from that old rural world.

The album’s release in 1994 generated a buzz of excitement around Cash, the intensity of which had not been seen in two decades, and it led to a fervently creative final decade in Cash’s life, at whose end Cash’s repute was “equal if not maybe superior to that with which he began his career.”<sup>53</sup> *American Recordings* had engaged in various clever promotional forays, setting up one-time Cash shows at hipster clubs the Viper Room in Hollywood and Fez in New York, hiring rock photographer Anton Corbijn to direct and supermodel Kate Moss to star in a video for “Delia’s Gone” (whose brief appearance on MTV before the network banned it only added to the publicity)—but had the album not contained real substance and artistry, this PR would surely have fallen flat.

Or would it? In the wake of the accolades, a few careful and sensitive Cash critics registered deeply skeptical assessments. These criticisms are germane to this chapter because they put the issue of Cash’s religiosity and persona in sharp relief. Briefly put, the critics charged that the *American* albums with Rubin (recorded 1993-2003) involved a wholesale makeover of Cash’s image, in which the Christian, the family man and patriot that Cash had become in the

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<sup>53</sup> David Sanjek, “In My Time of Dying: Johnny Cash, Johnny Paycheck, Gary Stewart and Cycles of Hipness” paper presented at the American Studies Association annual conference (2004)

early 70s, was supplanted by old but revamped 60s images of the dark rebel, the original badass. This makeover made Cash cool to a new crowd of young hipsters, but at the severe price of violating much that Cash had come to stand for, especially his religion. That American's promotional campaigns were wholly outside the elaborate edifice of the country music industry only seemed to prove the point that heavy revisionism by and for young hipsters—not Cash's claim of expressing “the real me”—was the driving force at work.

Music critic Chris Dickinson argued that on *American Recordings* “the born-again Cash was yet born again, only this time to an audience that wore crosses not as Christian symbols but as fashion accessories,” that the opening murder ballad was “less about Delia and more about marketing to the hip crowd that believes ‘real’ country music must hew to the Appalachian dead-baby school of songwriting.”<sup>54</sup> Biographer Michael Streissguth charged that Rubin “cast Cash as the avatar of darkness and rebellion,” overriding the fact that “for so long, [Cash had] done everything he could to shroud himself in light and patriotism.” These latter images hardly made for hip status, and Rubin's strategy found that, by contrast, “Lucifer's cape made for compelling packaging.”<sup>55</sup> In his 1997 *In the Country of Country*, journalist Nicholas Davidoff attributed this image revision not to Rubin but to Cash himself. “For all the platitudes about the pious life,” he argued, “the world found out Cash couldn't control himself, and Cash learned that the world didn't really want him to. The Man in Black was *supposed* to show his outlaw edge. When he told a Nashville trade publication in 1987, ‘I'll never be free of temptation, never free of my carnality,’ by then he knew just how delicious that sounded.”<sup>56</sup> Ethnomusicologist Aaron Fox

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<sup>54</sup> Chris Dickinson, “Cash Conquers” *Chicago Reader* September 16, 1994 in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 252-253

<sup>55</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 255-256. See also his editorial comments in *Ring of Fire*, where he argues that though in the early nineties Cash was a rather mellow man “singing for evangelist Billy Graham's crusades, championing religion and love of country, and living (for the most part) drug free,” Rubin's company's “publicity machine fed the dark side of Johnny Cash into its processors,” and “the entertainment media ate it up.” It was a one-sided “romanticizing of Cash's sins.” Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* xxi, 251

<sup>56</sup> Nicholas Davidoff, *In the Country of Country: People and Places in American Music* 193

saw the cover art of the American albums presenting Cash as “a foreboding, even avenging dark figure,” but argued that this was one-sided. In his entire oeuvre listeners would find both his “defiant, rebellious posture *and* his God-and-family patriotism.”<sup>57</sup> Director of BMI Archives David Sanjek argued that the primarily young audience Cash gained through the American albums were examples of the “aphasiac” nature of “public memory,” one that “intentionally obliterates the vast majority of recorded time.” Their image of Cash—strung-out, violent, a quintessential rebel figure—had no room to remember rival elements in Cash’s multi-faceted public life, “most of all, his heart-felt and irrevocable religiosity.”<sup>58</sup>

These are strong charges about the issues of artistic integrity and the possibility of real communication in the ephemeral arena of pop culture. My own scattered, informal conversations with hipsters in a college town indicate that far from being something that they needed to “intentionally obliterate,” Cash’s religiosity was a central aspect of his strange appeal (Rubin himself had said the same, as noted above).<sup>59</sup> Maybe numbers of listeners did imagine Cash unilaterally as the quintessential “avatar of darkness and rebellion,” as *Rolling Stone*’s “Mr. Cool,” as the original “gangsta,” while they slapped American-produced “CASH” bumper stickers on their cars and tried to locate copies of the banned “Delia’s Gone” video.<sup>60</sup> Certainly public taste and interest can be ephemeral and amnesiac, as well as aphasiac. However, anyone who actually bought and listened to the *American Recordings* album could not indulge in the one-sided imagining that Dickinson, Streissguth, Davidoff, Fox, and Sanjek alleged—unless their CD player somehow skipped songs like “Why Me Lord” and “Redemption,” unless they

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<sup>57</sup> Aaron Fox, “‘Alternative’ to What? *O Brother*, September 11, and the Politics of Country Music” in Charles Wolfe and James Akenson, eds. *Country Music Goes to War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 2005):174-176

<sup>58</sup> David Sanjek, “In My Time of Dying”

<sup>59</sup> These informal conversations have no written documentation, and they lack IRB sanction. Informal, unplanned conversation can get sometimes get at the truth better than staged, ordered, and documented interviews. See Raymond Arsenault’s use of people’s impressions about air conditioning in “The End of the Long Hot Summer” *Journal of Southern History* (1984)

<sup>60</sup> Jancee Dunn, “Mr. Cool”; Kurt Loder, “Johnny Cash: Original Gangsta” August 2003, [www.mtv.com](http://www.mtv.com)

were utterly tone deaf and missed the mood of lament that Cash evoked on “The Beast in Me” and “Down There By the Train.” The narrators in the songs ruminated on darkness as a basic element in life, but they hardly celebrated it in anything like a carefree spirit, and the Lucifer with whom the narrator on “Redemption” struggled as he held to the blood-nourished tree of life was not an image of innocent cool.

At the most basic level, what are at stake here are cultural assumptions about the character of Cash’s religion, as the American material and especially *American Recordings* allegedly violated and overshadowed that religion. The assumption is that oil and water don’t mix, anymore than for Ralph Peer, “nigger blues” and “old-time fiddle music” were supposed to: religion and light (and domesticity and patriotism) on the one hand, and darkness and rebellion (and being wild and being an outlaw) on the other. The man who made *Gospel Road* couldn’t, short of an exterior makeover, be the cold killer who sang of Delia. Cash’s rebellion and darkness had to be aspects of both his public and personal life that he left behind in the 60s as he moved into a world of religion and light—and thus *American Recordings*, in this line of argument, constituted not just revisionism but personal and artistic backtracking.

If Cash remained the Neo-Evangelical and Pentecostal that he was in the 70s, then it was: he ought to have been singing of the new life he had been infused with, not resurrecting the old dark rebel self from his younger days. But if Cash was indebted more deeply and enduringly to the religious ethos he absorbed in his youth, then finding a way to convey its idea that darkness was not *extrinsic* but rather *intrinsic* to the Christian’s life, part of a perpetual internal struggle, was an artistic breakthrough—not a one-sided makeover on Rubin’s part to make Cash palatable to the hip crowd. Oldest daughter Rosanne Cash argued after her father’s death that “Rick became not just his producer but his muse,” the inspiration that helped him regain his own

vision.<sup>61</sup> *American Recordings*' vision was entirely at home with the Louvin Brothers' "Satan is Real," with Blind Willie Johnson's "I Know His Blood Can Make Me Whole," with "Uncle Bob" who fought at night with the alluring voice of Satan, with the Georgia sharecropper who recalled being sexually deceived and noted that it could be hard to "tell the difference between Jesus Christ and the Devil." It was also, Cash's own children and others close to him have pointed out, a vision that expressed the complicated realities of Cash's personal life. Son John Carter wrote pointedly in his 2007 memoir that the neat story of the film *Walk the Line* was "not true. In fact, it's *far* from true," and he noted that in 1993, "behind the public curtain, drugs were in control...not only of my parents' lives, but mine also."<sup>62</sup> Marty Stuart, who replaced Marshall Grant in Cash's band in the 80s, was married for a time to his daughter Cindy, and returned to play guitar on *Unchained* (1996), *Solitary Man* (2000), and *The Man Comes Around* (2002), reflected after Cash's death that "I think he was scared most of losing people—he lost his mom, his dad, his wife—and of the dark force of Satan. John fully understood the power of the dark force. He'd be on his knees with a Bible in his hands, trying to cope with his demons."<sup>63</sup> Youngest daughter Tara wept when she heard "The Beast in Me." She told biographer Steve Turner that "that song to me is the essence of Dad. He had a way of being able to speak his darkness, and that's what made him a great artist. His darkness was essentially everybody's darkness, the demons we all have and wrestle with."<sup>64</sup>

But commercial country music seemed uninterested in wrestling with those demons. And, as the critics pointed out, *American Recordings* as a product was made almost entirely outside the channels of the country industry, produced by, marketed to, and heard by a young audience

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<sup>61</sup> Steve Turner, *Man Called Cash* 196

<sup>62</sup> John Carter Cash, *Anchored in Love* 58,132

<sup>63</sup> Marty Stuart reminiscence, *Rolling Stone* 933 (October 16, 2003):76

<sup>64</sup> Steve Turner, *Man Called Cash* 198

with a rock background and no discernible ties to the old rural South. Country radio didn't play the album's songs, and it peaked at #23 on the country charts—only as high as mediocre albums from the late 70s and early 80s *I Would Like to See You Again* and *The Baron*.<sup>65</sup> Wasn't the country deafness clear counterevidence to the above claim that Cash was drawing on the cultural resources of the old rural South? But as Bill Malone explains, the early 90s were a time of major transformation in commercial country music. Albums by singers Garth Brooks and Shania Twain, whose imagery was mainstream and quite distant from the old rural South, sold unprecedented amounts—more than any country singers before and, in Brooks' case, more than most pop singers ever. The industry pushed for youthful imagery and youthful markets, and the industry's principal advertising form, radio, engaged in “virtual abandonment” of older singers and older songs in its playlists. Cash was hardly unique; pillars of country music like Merle Haggard, George Jones, Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, and Willie Nelson were invisible on country radio in the 90s, and they have either retired from the industry or sought listeners outside the existing structures of the industry, on smaller labels and as “alternative country” performers.<sup>66</sup>

Beyond (highly lucrative) pecuniary considerations, this changing of the guard was reflective of some elements of real world experience. Younger country singers and listeners who came of age in the service economy of Sunbelt suburbs found both the imagery and ethos of older singers—who really did grow up in rural or working class poverty in the 30s and 40s—to have less resonance and relevance.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, Malone argues, as that last rural generation found their own initial Sunbelt prosperity in the 1950s, the character of their musical religious

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<sup>65</sup> On radio play, see Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 257 and Chet Flippo, “Art Versus Commerce” *Billboard* 110:38 (September 19, 1998); for chart position of various albums, see Joel Whitburn, *Top Country Albums 1964-1997*

<sup>66</sup> Flippo, “Art Versus Commerce;” Bill Malone, *Country Music USA* 442. See also Nicholas Davidoff, *In the Country of Country*

<sup>67</sup> Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin'* 50



expression began to change: “visions of cabins in gloryland gave way to dreams of mansions in heaven and here on earth.”<sup>68</sup> This shift was very gradual, and inherited tradition had staying power. Malone notes that well into the 50s, “at a time when the gospel quartet business was moving toward a soothing, nonsectarian message that eliminated all references to a vengeful God, a burning Hell, and the blood that stained the Old Rugged Cross, the Louvin Brothers and the Bailes Brothers were singing songs that recalled the fierce doctrinal battles of early southern Protestantism.”<sup>69</sup> By the 90s, however, this fierceness had largely disappeared. “Soothing songs of religious affirmation sometimes appear in the repertoires of country singers,” Malone wrote, “but the older passion-filled and doctrinaire gospel songs almost never surface on Top 40 country radio or in the performances of country entertainers.”<sup>70</sup> He also noted that old songs embodying “rural gospel humility” had become “very rare today [1998] in gospel music, as are all the philosophy and theology that once motivated them.”<sup>71</sup>

Malone’s historical analysis puts the criticisms about *American Recordings* in context. While for industrial, cultural, and generational reasons the album was alien to the dominant tone of commercial country music in the 90s, it had firm roots in an old rural religious sensibility. “Redemption” was precisely a meditation on the bloody crucifixion, and “Why Me Lord” and “Down There by the Train” became candid expressions of humility. A burning Hell was directly invoked in “Let the Train Blow the Whistle,” but more basically the threat of consignment to destruction was evoked in “Delia’s Gone,” “The Beast in Me,” and “Thirteen.” While there was hope, it was certainly not easily soothing, and the struggle against darkness was difficult and passionate.

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<sup>68</sup> Malone, “The Rural South Moves to the City” in Hurt, ed. *Rural South Since World War II* 103

<sup>69</sup> Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’* 104

<sup>70</sup> Malone, *Country Music USA* 436

<sup>71</sup> Malone, “The Rural South” in Hurt, ed. *Rural South* 103n13

While this evocation through new songs of an older sensibility made the *American Recordings* album foreign to commercial country music, it did give it resonance with a smaller cultural development of the 90s, a search for music of the old rural South that might speak to very contemporary phenomena. The wide popularity of Columbia's 1990 CD reissue *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* and Uncle Tupelo's 1990 *No Depression* album (whose title track was their cover of the Carter Family song "No Depression in Heaven") heralded the beginning of this search, a new wave of interest in early blues and country.<sup>72</sup> The soundtrack to the 2000 film *O Brother Where Art Thou* brought together many of these old songs and became very popular, director Martin Scorsese organized a much-discussed documentary miniseries on the blues, and *No Depression* became the title of a popular magazine that sought to cobble together "alternative country" musicians both young and old. *American Recordings* found its principal audience among this young alternative country crowd, people who explicitly sought a music informed by the very past that commercial country music seemed to have erased any traces of.<sup>73</sup>

But even as this alternative country phenomenon rested on sympathetic intergenerational dynamics, there were crucial differences along generational lines that showed the distinct stamp of Cash's background. A younger alt-country musician like Californian Gillian Welch could both compose and sing gospel material, songs like her own "Orphan Girl" or "Time the Revelator" (her twist on "John the Revelator"), but as she clarified in interviews, her own agnosticism meant that the songs were not expressions of personal belief, but rather experiments in a certain genre, resting on willing suspension of disbelief. Cash in the 90s, as in his mid-60s interview for *Music*

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<sup>72</sup> See Malone, *Country Music USA* 451 on Uncle Tupelo; James Cobb, "The Blues is a Lowdown Shakin' Chill" in Cobb, *Redefining Southern Culture: Mind and Identity in the Modern South* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1999):123-124; and Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues* on the blues revival.

<sup>73</sup> Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 261

*City News*, was unambiguous in declaring that the religious songs were not just nostalgia or a nod to heritage but heartfelt expression. And they were communicated in the *Late and Alone*-style of *American Recordings* in an intimately personal manner—one that, Bill Malone argues, the younger generation of alt-country performers does not have. “They can boogie or rock,” he writes, “but they find it difficult to wear their hearts on their sleeves.”<sup>74</sup>

That emotional unguardedness indicated the stamp of Cash’s working-class roots, where such candor was not “bad taste,” and more specifically, the religious culture of those roots, where the rural poor visibly displayed the heights and depths of religious emotion, even as their bourgeois critics fulminated regularly against this “excessive emotionalism.” The *American Recordings* album brought a humble plea for salvation and a spirit of candor about the dark regions in the soul—the antithesis of the self-control, harmony, and respectability that bourgeois Protestants of the New South proclaimed—into 1990s popular culture. It was greeted in the music world as a major statement by a major artist, and an attack on the norms of contemporary country music.<sup>75</sup> It inaugurated a decade of heightened public visibility for Cash, a visibility that reached an apex in the middle of 2003 when the video for Cash’s version of Trent Reznor’s “Hurt” inspired massive public discussion and became, as a CD/video single, Cash’s first multi-platinum single ever.<sup>76</sup>

The “Hurt” video may be understood as a kind of companion piece to the *American Recordings* album, a reflective rumination on the rival impulses in Cash’s persona. The lyrics evoked Cash’s lifelong struggle with drug addiction, and the not inconsiderable hurt and damage he had caused to others and that he himself had experienced. At the same time, from the

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<sup>74</sup> Bill Malone, *Country Music USA* 454

<sup>75</sup> Steve Turner, *Man Called Cash* 200-201; Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 255,261

<sup>76</sup> On its multi-platinum status, and comparison with sales of Cash’s other work, see the Recording Industry Association of America’s website, [www.riaa.com](http://www.riaa.com)

confinement that was this life, he longed penitently for reconciliation and Christian redemption. Here in the video, in disarmingly candid fashion, was big, bad Johnny Cash—the towering broad-shouldered figure who once swaggered on the public stage—now a prematurely old and badly decrepit man, surrounded by the ephemera of fame, who stared directly into the camera, dramatically poured a goblet of wine on a huge banquet table, and at the crescendo, wept in penitence as images of the crucifixion from his own *Gospel Road* flashed dizzyingly. This was heady, radical subject-matter for a music video, as reviewers unanimously pointed out in the winter and spring of 2003, and it generated considerable public discussion as a work of art, even as periodic news reports indicated that Cash was a dying man.<sup>77</sup> Yet, like the cover photograph on *American Recordings*, there was a strong element of sheer serendipity about the video. The video’s impetus came not from Cash but from director Mark Romanek, nor was the song Cash’s own composition but Nine Inch Nails’ Trent Reznor’s, and yet the final product captured Cash’s dialectical religious vision and dramatized the *via negativa*. In a tribute collection after Cash’s death, drummer W.S. Holland, who had spent more consistent time (1960-1997) with Cash than any other musician, reflected on how Cash “never dropped out” of public life or the music business, even as he was dying. “Just like the ‘Hurt’ video, his last big record,” Holland wrote. “That was something that was meant to happen. It was like John wrote that song himself and told the story of his life in it.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> For a sample, see Chet Flippo, “Nashville Skyline: Johnny Cash’s ‘Hurt’ Video” *cmt.com* February 13, 2003; Mark Binelli, “Video of the Year!” *Rolling Stone* 2/15/03; Armond White, “A Music Video Worthy of Film Comparison” *New York Press* March 12, 2003; James Sullivan, “Cash Goes Toe to Toe with Own Mortality” *San Francisco Chronicle* March 16, 2003; Martin Alston, “Cash’s Video Adieu” *Mojo* May 2003 [all accessible on [www.markromanek.com](http://www.markromanek.com)]; on news reports of Cash’s badly declining health, see Steve Turner, *Man Called Cash* 216-217; Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 276-278; Patrick Carr, “Johnny Cash: The Spirit is Willing” *Journal of Country Music*

<sup>78</sup> W.S. Holland in Hugh Waddell, comp., *I Still Miss Someone: Friends and Family Remember Johnny Cash* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2004):92

Recording the song was not Cash's idea. Rick Rubin brought the song to Cash in 2001-02, as he had periodically done throughout their ten-year collaborative work, and Cash thought the song was not one that he could make his own.<sup>79</sup> In its original Nine Inch Nails version, the song was an electronica-laced solipsistic ode of isolation and withdrawal. Rubin pushed for the song, and Cash ultimately came to both affirm it and to transform it. In Cash's treatment it took on a sad tone of lament, and his now-aged, feeble voice imprinted the song with a sense of painful and penitent rumination. Cash changed one phrase: Reznor's "crown of shit" became "crown of thorns," not, I think, because "pious" Cash couldn't stand to say "shit" (as a circulating urban legend had it), but to signify a penitent identification with the suffering Jesus—the same kind of identification that the narrator in "Redemption" sang of when he clung to the blood-nourished tree.<sup>80</sup>

Rock video director and Rubin friend Mark Romanek had been "pestering" Rubin for some time to do a video with Cash, and when he heard an advance copy of "Hurt" and *The Man Comes Around* album, he insisted on making a video for the song.<sup>81</sup> Romanek was a long-time Cash fan, and imagined a video that would be both a tribute to Cash's life and "very candid about what Johnny's life is like right now."<sup>82</sup> He was "bolstered," he later told biographer Steve Turner, "by the bold truthfulness and unusual candor that defined most of John's songs and public life."<sup>83</sup> Romanek's initial idea for the video was something "stylized and metaphoric" in a

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<sup>79</sup> On Rubin pushing for the song and Cash's initial resistance, see Rick Rubin interviewed by Terri Gross; Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 277

<sup>80</sup> This is my speculation, but it is informed by the fact that Cash showed little hesitation to use the word "shit" in his 1997 memoir. More importantly, the cultural assumption that being Christian, Cash must necessarily have refrained from cussing and attendant behaviors like drinking alcohol or enjoying sex fails to capture the character of the Christianity that Cash experienced as a child and that informed his adult life. I heard this urban legend repeatedly from college undergraduates in 2003-2005.

<sup>81</sup> Chet Flippo, "Nashville Skyline"

<sup>82</sup> Gil Kaufman, "The Story Behind Johnny Cash's 'Hurt'" [www.mtv.com](http://www.mtv.com), February 27, 2003

<sup>83</sup> Steve Turner, *Man Called Cash* 216

Samuel Beckett mode, to be filmed on a soundstage in Los Angeles.<sup>84</sup> Arrangements bogged down for a time, and Romanek ended up rushing to Cash's Hendersonville home with two days to film and gather material before Cash and his family left for several months in Jamaica. What he found there were the basic trappings of Cash's public and personal life: his house on Old Hickory Lake, memorabilia in the now-closed and water-damaged House of Cash (Cash's former recording studio and museum just up the road), an extensive film archive covering much of Cash's public life, and, of course, the visibly-aged Cash and June Carter.

Romanek filmed Cash in three framing images, sitting in an antique chair with his guitar, at a piano in silhouette against the backdrop of the wide expanse of the lake and the Tennessee hills, and, most dramatically in the second half of the song, at a massive banquet table with a sumptuous feast before him. Cash is alone in these images, except for the sudden and brief appearance of June Carter, who stands at a distance, and, even more distantly, his mother Carrie, who appears in an old photograph on the wall. Romanek also filmed still-life shots inside and outside the defunct House of Cash museum. From the museum he took four boxes of a film archive which, back in Los Angeles with editor Robert Duffy, he spent two weeks sifting through. The archive was varied, with Cash's early television appearances in the late 50s, his 1970 film *A Gunfight* with Kirk Douglas and his own 1973 film *Gospel Road*, a 1969 return visit to Dyess as captured in the documentary *Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music*, Cash riding a train as conductor in the 1974 television special *Ridin' the Rails*, with the "psychobilly Cadillac" in the video for the 1976 novelty song "One Piece at a Time," and commanding the stage in the 1969 BBC film of his recorded show at San Quentin prison. Romanek and Duffy

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<sup>84</sup> Ryan Dombal, "Mark Romanek's 'Hurt' Revives Johnny Cash's Career" *Neumu* May 21, 2003 [www.markromanek.com]

experimented with splicing images from these archives into a juxtaposition with Cash as he appeared in 2002, and they were startled by the effects.<sup>85</sup>

The resultant video was widely acclaimed as a work of art, proof that the medium could actually treat substantive issues and be more than just a marketing device playing on pretty faces and sexual desires. As a work of art it can communicate on several levels; there is no singular meaning. It can be read as a meditation on the mortality that everyone experiences, with Cash as an Everyman figure who unsentimentally faces the fact that his life is slipping away. Or perhaps it is an autobiographical appropriation of Reznor's junkie ode, a rumination on the isolation and hurt that drug addiction produces. Or it could be seen as a somber deflating of aspirations toward fame and celebrity, a kind of modern *Ecclesiastes* that emphasizes the ephemeral nature of what mainstream culture deems "success." But at the deepest level, the video framed Cash's life through the Christianity that he had struggled to both personally perpetuate and to artistically evoke.

Obviously, unlike the *Late and Alone* idea that later materialized as *American Recordings*, the "Hurt" video was not Cash's idea, though in a late interview he remarked that "I enjoyed doing the 'Hurt' video because I felt we were doing something, that it was something kind of special...I was right there in the middle of the thing."<sup>86</sup> The video expressed the spirit of Cash's vision in a dramatic and uncanny way. Those close to him, like W.S. Holland and his own children, noted this serendipitous appropriateness, and daughter Rosanne reflected to biographer Steve Turner that after seeing it in her father's office before its public debut, she

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<sup>85</sup> Steve Turner, *Man Called Cash* 216

<sup>86</sup> Joe D'Angelo, "Johnny Cash Says Unlike Most Videos, 'Hurt' Wasn't Too Painful" [www.mtv.com](http://www.mtv.com) August 27, 2003

sobbed uncontrollably and told him that “it wasn’t even a video. It was a documentary.”<sup>87</sup> In press at the time of the debut, Romanek articulated this same dimension, noting that after the Los Angeles shoot fell through, he had no “real concept” for the video, and that it “fell together in a very organic and almost accidental way,” through the use of artifacts from Cash’s public and personal life.<sup>88</sup> “I ascribe most of the power,” Romanek said as accolades began to pour in, “to the Johnny Cash-ness of it all.”<sup>89</sup>

The video begins with Cash sitting alone with his guitar, singing in a tone of lament and rumination. As images of the exterior of the defunct House of Cash flash periodically, Cash sings of trying to “kill it all away” but instead “remember[ing] everything.” He starts to pound a piano as the chorus begins to rise to a crescendo, asking “what have I become?” as images of a young Cash—riding a train as conductor, walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, hiking at his Tennessee home, on stage at San Quentin—alternate in rapid succession with close-ups of him in the present. At the climax of the chorus, as he sings “you could have it all/ my empire of dirt/ I will let you down/ I will make you hurt,” the viewer is taken inside the House of Cash, where broken and disheveled memorabilia accumulated to honor Cash’s career seem hollow and stripped of substance. As the song slows back down for the second verse, a brief clip from the 1970 film *A Gunfight* lets the younger Cash speak, and as a bad man character he glares at the camera and warns, “you stay the hell away from me, you hear?” Immediately this is supplanted by a new scene of the old Cash, who now sits alone at a banquet table where a massive feast is laid out. He stares at the camera and sings of being “full of broken thoughts/ I cannot repair,” how “beneath the stain of time/ the feelings disappear,” as a lengthy flashback shows him on a

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<sup>87</sup> Turner, *Man Called Cash* 216; Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 278; “My children, my grandchildren, they all love it,” Cash said in the August 2003 MTV interview (D’Angelo, “Johnny Cash Says”)

<sup>88</sup> Ryan Dombal, “Mark Romanek’s ‘Hurt’” *Neumu*

<sup>89</sup> Brian Mansfield, “Johnny Cash Puts a ‘Hurt’ on Video” *USA Today* February 13, 2003



1969 visit to Dyess, wandering pensively around the farmhouse and the surrounding expanse of the cotton fields. Then the crescendo of the chorus starts again, and June Carter makes her first appearance, standing at a distance and gazing at Cash with a remarkable look of profound sadness and affection. Images of Cash and June in their early married days then appear in contrast, as Cash sings “what have I become/ my sweetest friend/ everyone I know/ goes away in the end.” As the chorus swells and Cash again sings of his “empire of dirt,” he dramatically raises a goblet of wine and begins to pour it all over the festal food. Briefly we see June gazing from a distance as Cash sings “I will let you down,” and then the chorus adds a new stanza as the sound rises to a height and Cash sings “if I could start again/ a million miles away/ I would keep myself/ I would find away.” Rapid-fire images of him pouring wine out and bowing his head in his hands as he weeps alternate in a dizzying montage with varied snapshots of the young, strong Johnny and *Gospel Road* scenes of Christ being crucified and hanging on the cross. The video then comes to a sudden conclusion with a juxtaposition of two images of Cash, the old man in silhouette at the piano, and the young black-clad rockabilly with his guitar.<sup>90</sup>

“Hurt” evoked a basic image from Cash’s long career—big, bad Johnny Cash, a hulking, threatening figure—and creatively undermined it. It did not do this through W.J. Cash’s well-established southern plotline, where the hedonistic hell-raiser is tamed and domesticated through a pious woman. The two women that appear, June Carter and Carrie Cash, remain at a discrete and, in June Carter’s case, unsettling distance. Cash sings of isolation and disappointment even as she gazes at him with a removed mixture of sorrow and compassion. Neither she nor his mother can ultimately rescue him because, as his own testimony that featured them prominently (chapter 5) demonstrated, the humble soul had to find deliverance alone, in the solitude of the

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<sup>90</sup> Johnny Cash, “Hurt/ Personal Jesus” American Recordings, 2002; *Hurt*, dir. Mark Romanek (American Recordings, 2002)

lonesome valley that “all sinners got to walk by themselves.” Nor was Cash singing of carefree hedonistic wildness. His own appropriation of the dark lyrics turned them into a mournful reflection on a real darkness in his life, on the isolating damage he had both done to others and to himself. As his *American Recordings* album evoked and as he sought to explain in the prose of his 1997 memoir, that darkness had a dimension beyond simple “bad” or “fun.” It was a force that assailed the soul and sought to bring personal destruction. It was not moralistic vices (say, those that supposedly prompted Cash to not sing of “shit”) but a sinister “black dog” that put up a constant internal fight.

That sense of perpetual struggle also is intrinsic to how the video supplanted the Neo-Evangelical narrative of Cash’s life, one that he himself told in his 1975 *Man in Black* and through which biographers Steve Turner and Michael Streissguth have imagined his Christianity. In the most basic way, the video showed Cash in the twilight of his life, still wrestling with the “hurt” and “broken thoughts” that he could not amend. In place of the freedom from the personal past as promised by the Neo-Evangelicals was a long, penitent backward glance at that past, a longing to “start again a million miles away,” to hold on to self and yet be changed in the process.

Two of the concluding images suggested the way in which Cash imagined that kind of personal transformation. Romanek had framed him at a banquet table in a style that suggested the Last Supper, and Cash had the idea of pouring the wine out onto the festal food.<sup>91</sup> The concluding montage used imagery that Cash himself had created as a younger man, scenes from *The Gospel Road*, and joined his penitent rumination with the sufferings of Jesus. *Gospel Road* had itself concluded with a strange juxtaposition of Christ’s crucifixion into the streets of modern America, and its appearance in “Hurt” was less a modernization than an intimate personalization.

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<sup>91</sup> Mark Romanek to author, August 13, 2007

Michael Streissguth argues critically that this close identification with a suffering Jesus “may have disturbed Cash if he gave much thought to it,” for it verged on allegedly sacrilegious identification of Johnny and Jesus.<sup>92</sup> However, in the rural Protestant world that Cash grew up in, such intimate identification and personalized appropriation was *de rigueur*; it was precisely through such a strategy that the rural poor sought to name and find a way out of the trouble in their lives (see, for a sampling, Carlos Williams’ sermon in chapter 4, the anonymous black preacher defending lack of education in chapter 6, and the blurry line between biblical past and New South present in the sermons of chapter 7). In the midst of candidly acknowledging the hurt in his life and that which he had caused to others, through dramatizing the severe limits of human capacity in a personalized *via negativa*, Cash portrayed identification with the suffering Christ as the route to undoing the prison of self-destruction.

In his provocative essay “In My Time of Dying: Johnny Cash, Johnny Paycheck, Gary Stewart and Cycles of Hipness,” David Sanjek compares Cash’s last years to those of two lesser-known country performers. Both Stewart and Paycheck were gifted honky-tonk singers who died in 2003, Stewart of suicide after the devastating loss of his wife, and Paycheck of diabetes and emphysema after numerous arrests, prison time, and a Neo-Evangelical conversion. Cash also lost his wife and ended up dying of diabetes-related infirmities, yet he was highly visible in his last years and—rare in American popular culture—artistically and publicly engaged with his own mortality. Moreover, Sanjek argues, in the gestures that conclude the “Hurt” video Cash “acknowledges his ferocity in a form that allowed him to give it expression while not permitting it, as did the two other performers, to destroy him literally...The two other men suffered and, in

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<sup>92</sup> Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 277

Stewart's case, gave in to their 'black dog,' whereas Cash found a form to convey and contain it."<sup>93</sup>

That he was able to do this in the public eye, with an "almost novelistic appropriateness" as his life came to a close was, Sanjek also argues, at some level a matter of sheer luck and serendipitous timing. That he was able to do it in the specific way that he did demonstrates a historical force far less arbitrary: the staying power of an inherited religious mentality. The ethos of the Protestant culture of Cash's youth imagined evil as a perennial force of darkness, called for lifelong struggle against that force, displayed unguarded and passionate longing for and connection with God's rescuing power, and imagined that that power was most deeply understood in moments of severe human insufficiency. For Cash this ethos was more than just a childhood relic or object of nostalgia; it became the provocative lens through which, in the final decade of his life, he crafted art that skillfully engaged with central images of his public persona, particularly his destructiveness and his longing for Christian deliverance. The feeble figure who stared candidly at the viewer of "Hurt" was, beneath the various levels of rich imagery, an O'Connoresque "freak" with a visible burden.

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<sup>93</sup> David Sanjek, "In My Time of Dying"

## CHAPTER 9

### THE MAN IN BLACK AND THE MAN OF REVELATION

The wide public visibility attending the last years of Cash's life matched that of his unquestioned zenith period, 1968-1971. The previous chapter has explored some of the forces at work in that final stage of popularity. This chapter examines certain elements of the complicated art that Cash put before the public in the apogee years 1968-1971. Cash's appeal in these years was multi-layered: he was a working-class portrayer of the past in a time of critical social uncertainty, an "authentic" folk figure who spoke for voices neglected in the mainstream, a democratic bridge between country music and aspects of the counterculture.<sup>1</sup> He was invited to play his songs by such disparate hosts as the Lakota Sioux at Wounded Knee and Richard Nixon in the White House.<sup>2</sup> A central element of his appeal and art was a skillful fusion of his rural Christianity with aspirations at work in the social ferment of the time. Cash found creative ways to bring basic themes from his rural religious background—a democratic sense of God's favoritism towards the lowly (chapter 7), an abiding feeling of human limit (chapter 6), and liminality as the locus of revelation (chapter 5)—into rich engagement with currents in the culture (or, rather, counterculture), reaching a succinct culmination in the "Man in Black" persona that he created in 1971. This enigmatic figure sustained Cash's aura even as his

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<sup>1</sup> For a sample: "Cash is the lost American, recalling some classic gunfighter or preacher...He has walked out of yesterday at an uncertain juncture when yesterday looks very, very good...He still belongs to the Dyess Colony with its weathered shotgun shacks, muddy drainage ditches and flat fields stuffed with cotton" Christopher Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too: The Life of Johnny Cash* 242; "As the first angry man of the country songsters—the first grim and gutsy pusher of social causes—he has broken the mold of Nashville Grand Ole Opry-type country-Western and is pounding out his own folk form" Tom Dearmore, "First Angry Man of Country Singers" *New York Times Magazine* September 21, 1969 in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 93; "Just now the really passionate cry for prison reform in this country is coming from an unlikely prophet: country-folk singer Johnny Cash" Donald Shockley and Richard Freeman, "Johnny Cash on Prison Reform" *Christian Century* (September 30, 1970):1157

<sup>2</sup> Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too* 7-23, 217

commercial success and creative drive declined in the early 70s and then bottomed out in the 80s and early 90s, before rejuvenating in 1994.<sup>3</sup> That rejuvenation culminated in the remarkable 2002 song “The Man Comes Around,” a strange kind of companion piece to “Man in Black,” with an evocation of mystery and limit and a rich portrait of a different kind of elusive, liminal figure.

The May 1968 release of *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* inaugurated four years of mass popularity and complicated creativity, the zenith years of 1968-1971. “That’s when the roof blew off,” Marshall Grant recalled in a 1988 interview.<sup>4</sup> Before *Folsom* Cash had scored a few hits in the Pop Top 20—the Sun singles “I Walk the Line,” “Ballad of a Teenage Queen,” and “Guess Things Happen That Way,” and the 1963 hit “Ring of Fire”—and one album, *The Fabulous Johnny Cash* (1958) had risen to #19 on the Pop album charts.<sup>5</sup> Cash had also cultivated a following with the urban, Northern youth of the folk revival, playing at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival, recording songs by Peter LaFarge and Bob Dylan for his albums *Bitter Tears* (1964) and *Orange Blossom Special* (1965), and writing an open letter in defense of Dylan’s personalized turn in the pages of folk journal *Sing Out!*<sup>6</sup> But he was largely a figure in the smaller, non-mainstream world of country music. His stature there was very high; leading country trade journal *Music City News* reported in June 1968, just as *Folsom* and its single were beginning to make waves, that Cash had signed a new contract with Columbia and that he had “a

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<sup>3</sup> For a sample, see the Franklin Mint’s 1981 boxed-set *Johnny Cash, The Man in Black* (FMRS CW 009-010); Bill Williams, “Man in Black Returns to the Fold” *Kingsport Times-News* January 10, 1986; Mary Dickie, “Hard Talk from the God-Fearin’, Pro-Metal Man in Black” *Graffiti* October 1987; Dave Hoekstra, “The Man in Black Lives His Life Close to the Earth” *Chicago Sun-Times* September 11, 1988 [the latter three noted in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 277-286]

<sup>4</sup> Country Music Foundation Oral History Project, Interview w/ Marshall Grant by John Rumble 5/25/88

<sup>5</sup> Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Hits* 110-111

<sup>6</sup> “No country singer was as thoroughly immersed in the urban folk waters as Johnny Cash” Bill Malone, *Country Music USA* 282; see also Steve Turner, *The Man Called Cash* 105-109; Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash: The Biography* 116-124

reputation seldom duplicated by a Country-and-Western artist.”<sup>7</sup> *Folsom* blew the roof off this country status in that it pushed Cash into mass visibility and popularity, in both the mainstream and counterculture.<sup>8</sup> *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Vogue*, *Look*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and other channels of popular media ran features on Cash, and in November 1969 he appeared on the cover of *Life*. Journalist Tom Dearmore described what to him was an “astonishing cross section” of people in the audience at a Cash show in Illinois in July 1969: “American Gothics in bib overalls and dirty-footed hippies are jammed together, along with mechanics, cab drivers, factory girls, red-faced tractor hands, students from the University of Illinois and a smattering of fashionable suburban types.”<sup>9</sup> Two years later, Dorothy Gallagher observed Cash listeners as diverse as a Mobile, Alabama audience of men with crew cuts and women with “unhip rim glasses and permanent waves,” and a long-haired twenty-three year old New Yorker who told her, “I really dig him...He’s into what’s happening now—kids and drugs and war. His head is changing, but he’s still real, you know?”<sup>10</sup> This diverse audience was also buying his records in unparalleled amounts: at the end of 1969, Columbia president Clive Davis announced that Cash had sold more records than the Beatles.<sup>11</sup>

In some ways, Cash’s mass popularity in these years was part of a larger phenomenon, a widespread—and ephemeral—interest in country music from those outside its core constituency of the white working class with roots in the rural South. Bill Malone writes of a “national ‘discovery’” of country music in the late 60s, and argues that “in the realm of popular culture, country music seemed a safe retreat to many because it suggested the ‘bedrock’ American values

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<sup>7</sup> *Music City News* June 1968 p27

<sup>8</sup> For a sample of early reviews from both mainstream and underground media, see Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison: The Making of a Masterpiece* 140-141

<sup>9</sup> Tom Dearmore, “First Angry Man” in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 95

<sup>10</sup> Dorothy Gallagher, “Johnny Cash: ‘I’m Growing, I’m Changing, I’m Becoming’” *Redbook* August 1971 in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 111-112

<sup>11</sup> Steve Turner, *Man Called Cash* 125

of solidity, respect for authority, old-time religion, home-based virtues, and patriotism.”<sup>12</sup> In September 1969 Tom Dearmore could ask in the *New York Times Magazine*, “why on the threshold of the nineteen-seventies, is the United States reverting to its rurigenous music of the nineteen-thirties?” even as he noted that “the country seems to have gone ‘country’ crazy,” with TV shows like *Hee Haw* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* and country singers recording with the Boston Pops.<sup>13</sup> In 1969 Bob Dylan had himself “gone country” with his *Nashville Skyline* album (opening with a duet with Cash), Richard Nixon could invite both Cash and Merle Haggard to the White House in an attempt to enlist country music for his “law and order” campaign, the CPUSA felt the need to lambaste Haggard’s hit “Okie from Muscogee” in its *Peoples Word*, and journalists (Paul Hemphill, *The Nashville Sound*) and academics (the 1972 essay “Country Music: Ballad of the Silent Majority”) searched the medium for clues to the cultural politics of the white working class.<sup>14</sup>

Still, Cash was unparalleled as a country singer with mass popularity in these years. And of the country figures, he was unique in crafting art and a persona that connected the religion of his rural youth with ferment in the counterculture. Major artists Loretta Lynn (on her 1968 *Who Says God is Dead!* and 1972 *God Bless America Again*), Buck Owens (on his 1970 *Your Mother’s Prayer*), Charley Pride (on his 1971 *Did You Think to Pray*), and Merle Haggard (on his 1972 *The Land of Many Churches*) recorded albums that drew on nostalgia and yearnings for alleged rustic simplicity. Capitol Records advertised Owens’ album thus: “Buck Owens sings the beloved melodies of simpler days, when evenings were spent with the family, gathered around

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<sup>12</sup> Bill Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* 237-243; Malone, *Country Music USA* 317

<sup>13</sup> Tom Dearmore, “First Angry Man” Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 90-91

<sup>14</sup> CPUSA noted in *Music City News* May 1971 p26; Paul Hemphill, *The Nashville Sound: Bright Lights and Country Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970); Paul DiMaggio, Richard Peterson, and Jack Esco, “Country Music: Ballad of the Silent Majority” in Serge Denisoff and Richard Peterson, eds. *The Sounds of Social Change* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972)



the piano, sharing songs of faith and belief.”<sup>15</sup> Bill Malone argues in his analysis of Haggard’s religious albums that “while we should not deny the possibility of some kind of spiritual dimension,” they are “best understood as tributes to his parents and their world...as celebrations of those ‘precious memories’ of childhood when virtue and innocence prevailed.”<sup>16</sup>

This kind of nostalgia flourishes insofar as one is no longer living within a tradition, but rather recollects it as an aspect of the frozen (and sanitized) past. Comparing the autobiographical statements of eight major country performers, Ted Olson finds that Loretta Lynn in her adult life came to believe in reincarnation and a generalized “spiritualism,” that Merle Haggard was antagonistic to organized Christianity, and that Charley Pride has stated that he doesn’t want “to get caught up in organized religion.”<sup>17</sup> Cash, by contrast, was personally defining himself within the religious tradition of his youth, and as he artistically brought it into engagement with contemporary concerns, he upset stock assumptions and developed a complicated persona.

“He defies classification...he’s into hymns,” critic Richard Goldstein wrote in *Vogue* in 1969, “but they aren’t excuses to knock the Supreme Court and bigcity sin.”<sup>18</sup> In *Christian Century*, two college-based Methodist ministers saw Cash’s twin prison albums as a contemporary embodiment of the subversive visions of the Old Testament prophets. Cash mourned with the prisoners, they noted, and “he also cries out like an Amos” against systemic injustice. The churches would do well, they argued, to listen to this “country bard” who “sees Isaiah’s vision somewhat more vividly than they do.”<sup>19</sup> In a laudatory *Life* review of the *Folsom*

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<sup>15</sup> *Music City News* March 1970 p32 [full-page ad]

<sup>16</sup> Bill Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’* 116

<sup>17</sup> Ted Olson, “‘Your Inner Voice That Comes from God:’ Country Singers’ Attitudes toward the Sacred” Charles Wolfe and James Akenson, eds. *Country Music Annual* 4-8

<sup>18</sup> Richard Goldstein, “Something Rude Showing” *Vogue* August 15, 1969 in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 89

<sup>19</sup> Donald Shockley and Richard Freeman, “Johnny Cash on Prison Reform” *Christian Century* 1157

album, critic Al Aronowitz understood Cash as a complex figure whose songs “may as well be fired from six-guns and a Bible under his writing arm.”<sup>20</sup> In *McCall's* Jeanne Sakol described him as “Tom Joad on the run...Walker Evans faces...One of Woody Guthrie’s bunch. Hard rambler. Hard gambler...Sidewalk preacher. Gotta get a hold in that rock, don’t you see?”<sup>21</sup> Journalist Dorothy Gallagher wrote that “on stage Cash mixes piety with *machismo*, switching from gospel to love songs to lusty ballads.”<sup>22</sup> Folk revivalist Christopher Wren found Cash a “complex spirit” with a “plain-style Faulknerian preoccupation with his rural South,” singing “bitter protest songs” about injustices suffered by native Americans and compassionate songs for convicts, conveyed by a dramatic stage presence: “even in foreign fields (at the London Palladium he broke all attendance records), Cash paces his show like a backwoods revival. Clad in black...he fills the stage—a towering circuit rider selling salvation.”<sup>23</sup>

The idea for the *At Folsom Prison* album that began this period of wide visibility had its genesis in relative obscurity. In 1957 Cash received a letter from an inmate at the Texas State Prison in Huntsville, applauding his song “Folsom Prison Blues” and asking that he come to the prison to perform. Cash and the Tennessee Two traveled to Huntsville to play and ended up doing a soaked, de-electrified acoustic show outdoors in a thunderstorm. Beginning with that show, in response to successive requests from other inmates in other prisons and because of his own personal feelings of sympathy for the imprisoned, Cash and his troupe (the Tennessee Three after the addition of drummer W.S. Holland in 1960) played some thirty to forty prison concerts.<sup>24</sup> Various Pop, Country, and R&B musicians played the occasional prison show, but the Cash troupe made it a regular custom. These shows were out of the public eye and *pro bono*.

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<sup>20</sup> Al Aronowitz, “Music Behind the Bars” *Life* 65 (August 16, 1968):12

<sup>21</sup> Jeannie Sokol, “Grit and Grace of Johnny Cash” *McCall's* 97 (July 1970):28

<sup>22</sup> Gallagher, “Johnny Cash” *Redbook* in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 118

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Wren, “The Restless Ballad of Johnny Cash” *Look* 33 (April 29, 1969):68-72

<sup>24</sup> Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* 109-110; Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 269-270

Already in the early 60s, Marshall Grant remembers, rumors (untrue) began to circulate that Cash himself had served time—testament to the regularity of the shows, and to the believability of Cash’s songs about prisoners.<sup>25</sup> Albert Nussbaum, serving time for bank robbery in the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, wrote about seeing a Cash show in mid-1970. On the staple “Folsom Prison Blues,” Cash changed the word to “Leavenworth” and, Nussbaum wrote, “it captured our own feelings so exactly that our roar of approval completely drowned out the music and amplified the sound of his deep bass voice...Johnny has an empathy, a sympathy and understanding for prisoners that would be difficult to counterfeit.”<sup>26</sup>

With dynamics of resonance like those that Nussbaum described, Cash and the Tennessee Three forged a regularized repertoire of songs for their prison shows, songs that articulated the prisoner’s condition with unsentimental realism. They were songs, Cash reflected in a 1997 interview, “about the working man, and the hard life...songs about the down and outer.”<sup>27</sup> There were also gospel songs, like “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” which became a staple of the Cash show (see chapter 8), that brought a message of hope in the midst of candid evocation of confinement. To sing gospel songs at the show’s conclusion repeated in a prison what Cash was doing in his more regularized concerts, but the prison setting imbued them with new meanings. The prisoners might be society’s ultimate outcasts, literally beyond the pale, but God’s order was different from society’s and in this democratic openness even the forsaken prisoner had a place. Merle Haggard, who was serving time in California’s San Quentin prison when he saw the Cash troupe perform on New Year’s Day 1958, expressed this strange religious dynamic in a 1999 interview with Marty Stuart. Stuart asked him about the resonance of the

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<sup>25</sup> Marshall Grant with Chris Zar, *I Was There When It Happened: My Life with Johnny Cash* 101

<sup>26</sup> Albert Nussbaum, “When Johnny Cash Visited Leavenworth” *Sunday Gazette Mail* (Charleston, WV) October 7, 1973 in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 81

<sup>27</sup> Johnny Cash interview with Terri Gross, National Public Radio, November 4, 1997

gospel songs, and Haggard said, “well, he offered the beliefs that you and I were raised on. He brought Jesus Christ into the picture, and he introduced him in a way that the tough, hardened, hard-core convict wasn’t embarrassed to listen to. He didn’t point no fingers; he just knew how to do it.”<sup>28</sup> Haggard, whose parents were “Okie” migrants to California in the mid-30s, and Stuart, who grew up in Mississippi in the 60s, had personal ties to the rural, working-class Protestant culture that Cash’s gospel songs drew on. Yet Haggard expressed the sense that Cash was doing more than offering up escapist nostalgia. The gospel songs brought the Man of Sorrows, the divine favoritism for the lowly and humble—central themes in the oral culture of rural Protestantism (chapter 7)—into the confines of prisons across the United States in the 50s and 60s.

And the *At Folsom Prison* album brought that democratically-toned Christianity into American popular culture. Cash originated the idea of recording one of the prison shows for a live album in the early 60s, but met with stiff resistance from Columbia A&R director Don Law. Law encouraged historical concept albums like *Ride This Train* (1960) and *Ballads of the True West* (1965), and was willing to let Cash record significantly less-lucrative gospel albums (1959’s *Hymns by Johnny Cash* and 1962’s *Hymns from the Heart*), but didn’t go for the prison album idea.<sup>29</sup> With Law’s retirement in mid-1967 and the appointment of Bob Johnston as new A&R director of Columbia’s Country & Western division, Cash found an eager ear for his idea.<sup>30</sup> A Texas native, Johnston was a free-spirited renegade in the music industry—described by his predecessor Law as “a real madman”—but he had won significant acclaim, and income for Columbia, with his production of Bob Dylan’s 65-66 masterpieces *Highway 61 Revisited* and

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<sup>28</sup> Merle Haggard interview with Marty Stuart, *Johnny Cash at San Quentin* (Legacy Edition) liner notes, Columbia/Legacy (2006)

<sup>29</sup> Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash* 268-270; Michael Streissguth also reports that Cash appealed directly to Columbia president Goddard Leiberson, but was refused. See Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* 61

<sup>30</sup> *Music City News* March 1967 p31; April 1967 p12

*Blonde on Blonde*, and albums by Simon and Garfunkel and Aretha Franklin.<sup>31</sup> His openness to experimentation fueled Cash's own creativity and resulted in a string of successful singles and albums, before his departure from Columbia in late 1970. Johnston gave the crucial go-ahead for the prison album, and through Cash's friend and minister Floyd Gressett (himself a migrant from Texas to California in 40s), arrangements were made to bring recording equipment to California's notorious Folsom State Prison, where the Cash troupe had first played in 1966.<sup>32</sup> Fifteen years before, inspired by the B-movie *Inside the Walls of Folsom Prison* that he saw in the Air Force in Germany, Cash had composed a song that memorialized the prison's name when it became a 1955 hit.<sup>33</sup>

The album that the Cash troupe (the Tennessee Three, June Carter as duet partner, Carl Perkins on second guitar, and the Statler Brothers on back-up vocals) and Johnston's field equipment recorded in January 1968 is a rich work of art, a document of high theatre. The National Recording Preservation Board chose it in 2003 for its permanent sound collection in the Library of Congress, and in 2004 Cash biographer Michael Streissguth wrote a close study of the making and reception of the album, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison: The Making of a Masterpiece*. As a work of art, like "Hurt," it communicates on various levels: as a statement of the humanity and dignity of the outcast prison population through singing of their confined longings, as an artistic act of solidarity with the down-and-out (Cash in the liner notes summons the listener to "hear the sounds of the men, the convicts—all brothers of mine"), as a metaphor for the various "prisons" that all finite human beings find themselves in.<sup>34</sup> The interest here is

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<sup>31</sup> Country Music Foundation Oral History Project, Interview w/ Don Law by Douglas Green 5/14/75; *Music City News* March 1967 p31

<sup>32</sup> Christopher Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too* 168; Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* 111

<sup>33</sup> Johnny Cash to Vivian Liberto October 13, 1951 in Vivian Cash with Ann Sharpsteen, *I Walked the Line* 30

<sup>34</sup> Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison*; Johnny Cash, liner notes to *At Folsom Prison* Columbia Records, 1968; Dorothy Horstman, *Sing Your Heart Out Country Boy*

simply in one dimension of the album, how it—and the fervent creative period it sparked—skillfully brought basic themes from the rural Protestantism of Cash’s youth into the cultural ferment of the late 60s and early 70s.

*At Folsom Prison* did not primarily present new songs, but rather the repertoire that the Cash troupe had honed in a decade of playing prison concerts, songs like 1957’s “Give My Love to Rose,” 1958’s “I Still Miss Someone,” 1959’s “I Got Stripes,” 1962’s “Send a Picture of Mother,” 1963’s “Dark as a Dungeon,” and 1964’s “The Wall,” songs evoking loss and confinement, with some male-female taunting (1967’s “Jackson”) and cornpone humor (1966’s “Dirty Old Egg-Suckin’ Dog”) also worked in. Veteran Cash listeners could hear new treatments of a few songs—the country staple “Green, Green Grass of Home,” and the driving “Cocaine Blues” (a modern adaptation of the old folk “Bad Man Ballad” that Cash had recorded in 1960 as “Transfusion Blues”)—and, as the concluding centerpiece and a dramatic surprise, the new gospel song “Greystone Chapel.”<sup>35</sup>

“Greystone Chapel” was the one song at the Folsom show that had not been fine-tuned through give-and-take with prison audiences. It took the place of the familiar gospel numbers with which Cash closed his shows, songs that had made an impression on a hearer like Merle Haggard, but it was a new composition—written by an inmate at Folsom and making its public debut when Cash performed it after having heard it for the first time the day before. Floyd Gressett preached regularly at Folsom, and he counseled many of the prisoners, including a thirty-one year old named Glen Sherley, a child of migrants from rural Oklahoma to California, serving five to life for armed robbery.<sup>36</sup> Sherley had written and home-recorded a gospel song, and Gressett smuggled the tape out of the prison and, in a motel room in Sacramento the day

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<sup>35</sup> John and Alan Lomax heard the “Bad Man Ballad” at Parchman State Prison in Mississippi in 1933. See Lomax and Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Dover, 1994 [1934]):89-91

<sup>36</sup> For Sherley’s background, see Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* 66-67

before the show, he presented the tape to Cash. When the song was played, journalist Gene Beley recalled, “Cash’s usual straight-faced, deep-creased cheeks began changing to a smile, with his eyes glowing, radiating enthusiasm.” “I want to record it tomorrow on the album during the show,” he said, and began writing the words in a notebook.<sup>37</sup>

Cash’s artistic instinct and sense of drama were acute. At the conclusion of the show he announced what to everyone in the audience, Sherley included, was a complete surprise. “This song was written by our friend Glen Sherley,” Cash said, though he had met Sherley only through the mediation of his smuggled recording. “Hope we do your song justice, Glen. We’re going to do our best,” he said humbly as the band launched into the opening notes. At this “the prisoners roared,” Beley remembers, “whistling, screaming, and stomping their feet in the glory of the moment, while the guards on the catwalks clutched their rifles,” and Streissguth notes that “the prisoners saved their most strident applause” for Sherley’s song.<sup>38</sup> This was a dramatic way to display the solidarity with the imprisoned that he wrote about in the album’s liner notes, singing one of the inmates’ own songs back to the thousand or so prisoners in the audience. But there was something else at work in the song, an element of sheer serendipity, like the two dogs on the cover of *American Recordings* or the final “Hurt” video. In Sherley’s song Cash was able to not simply affirm the prisoners’ humanity, including their religious longings, but also to put across a democratic Christian vision. In “Greystone Chapel” Cash sang “you wouldn’t think God had a place here at Folsom/ but he’s saved the soul of many lost men.” The song focused on the meaning of the prison’s chapel, and imagined it as a uniquely open space in a world of confinement: “it takes a ring of keys to move here at Folsom/ but the door to the house of God is

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<sup>37</sup> Gene Beley, “Folsom Prison Blues” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 81:1 (Winter 2005):220-223; Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 149; Beley’s recording of Sherley’s recording of the song can be heard on “Inside Johnny Cash’s Folsom Prison” National Public Radio “All Things Considered” November 18, 2005

<sup>38</sup> Beley, “Folsom Prison Blues” 224; Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 150

never locked.” Those who sought solace in the promises embodied in the chapel learned an identity that transcended their social place. Though they were society’s outcasts, men whose role was to now ruminate on their guilt, that social definition was not the final word: “inside the walls of prison my body may be/ but my Lord has set my soul free.” More movingly and, in its place on the live album, more publicly than the more familiar gospel songs that Cash sang at the close of his previous prison shows, this song captured a democratic religious vision. Maybe Sherley’s Oklahoma parents had passed on such a sense to him. Perhaps Texan Floyd Gressett had communicated it in his counseling. At any rate, the song breathed the spirit of rural Protestantism, that forged by a poor people who suffered their own confinements and social marginality, and in his appropriation of it Cash communicated this democratic Christianity to a late 60s popular audience, intriguing and puzzling them—and enlivening his own imagination in the process.<sup>39</sup>

*At Folsom Prison* sold 500,000 copies in its first five months, winning Cash his third “gold” record.<sup>40</sup> On the heels of *Folsom*’s success, and also with the experimental sanction of Bob Johnston, Cash was able to follow through with the “Holy Land” album idea he had first floated in early 1966 (see chapter 8). In the summer of 1968, a few months after their marriage in March, Cash and June Carter traveled to Israel with a tape recorder and ideas for an album: following the story of Jesus’ life in the concept album/travelogue style that Cash had developed on *Ride This Train* and *Ballads of the True West*, mixing spoken-word narrative and song. Cash (and Carter briefly) spoke a rambling monologue into the recorder, and back in the studio in Nashville with the regular musicians of his road show, recorded accompanying songs primarily

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<sup>39</sup> Johnny Cash, *At Folsom Prison* (Columbia, 1968)

<sup>40</sup> See statistics on the RIAA website, [www.riaa.com](http://www.riaa.com). Two previous albums, 1963’s *Ring of Fire: The Best of Johnny Cash* and 1965’s *I Walk the Line*, both primarily compilations of older material, had won “gold” status about two years after their release.



of his own composition. Jesus as evoked in Cash's "Nazarene" and "He Turned the Water into Wine" was a lowly figure, born in an "unimportant place in Galilee," who walked the "dusty roads" and was a special friend to the poor, like the impoverished wedding hosts at whose banquet he made wine out of water.<sup>41</sup> He suffered a cruel and violent death but, in God's mystery, that death became a source of new life. In the concluding number, "God is Not Dead" (surely prompted, like Loretta Lynn's 1968 *Who Says God is Dead!* album, by the famous *Time* cover), Cash sang of God's mysteries at work in everyday phenomena: "who can make one seed then make it grow/...who can command which way the wind to blow/ and who can match the miracle in an eagle's eye/ or hand a rainbow in a cloudy sky." Both the evocation of a humble Man of Sorrows and a sense of everyday mystery were entirely of the spirit of rural Protestantism, but as conveyed on *The Holy Land* album, released in early 1969, they were framed in a form that located them in the distant past. Sales of the album were buoyed by *Folsom*'s success, as it rose to #6 on the Country charts, and by its single, Carl Perkins' sentimental, nostalgic "Daddy Sang Bass," which spent six weeks at #1 on the Country chart.<sup>42</sup> But the album did not really demonstrate a creative engagement of past tradition and present culture, and three years later, Cash and Carter would return to Israel for another, more ambitious attempt at evoking the life of Jesus in a contemporary vein.

Before that trip in the fall of 1971, though, Cash found ways to pursue religious expression in a spirit of creative fusion that, like his performance of Sherley's "Greystone Chapel," made it more than a timepiece. Cash was available to the public in a variety of media in those years: hosting a prime time television show on ABC from 1969-1971; appearing in the 1969 British film *At San Quentin*, the 1969 cinema verite-ish documentary *Johnny Cash: The*

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<sup>41</sup> Johnny Cash, *The Holy Land* (Columbia, 1968). Cash adds the detail that the family was poor. In the New Testament, they serve wine but then run out of it (Gospel of John 2:3)

<sup>42</sup> Joel Whitburn, *Top Country Albums 1964-1997* 29; Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Country Hits* 68

*Man, His World, His Music*, and the 1970 Kirk Douglas film *A Gunfight*; as the subject of a number of biographies but most notably Christopher Wren's 1971 *Winners Got Scars Too*; singing for audiences everywhere from Carnegie Hall to the Newport Folk Festival to Cummins State Prison in Arkansas; and as an interview subject and object of fascination in massive amounts of press. But the music he recorded in those years, with the open experimentalism of Bob Johnston in 1969-70 and then producing himself in 1971, deserves primary consideration, because it was the foundation on which his high cultural status was built, and because millions of people were buying these records. They were some of the best-selling records in Cash's long career and some of the best-selling records in country music until the transformation of the 1990s.<sup>43</sup>

In early 1969, what was scheduled to be a routine Cash show at a prison, California's San Quentin, became a second live album when a British film company pushed to document the event and Cash, Johnston, and manager Saul Holiff decided to bring recording equipment into a prison for the second time. The result, 1969's *At San Quentin*, was an obvious companion to *At Folsom*, but whereas the mood in the Folsom show was somber and ruminative, the spirit that Cash projected at San Quentin was angry and swaggering. He came with two new compositions, "San Quentin" and "Starkville City Jail," the first raging at the prison system and its futility, the second satirizing it through the story of Cash's arrest for "pickin' flowers." Cash spouted profanity between songs and bantered with the prisoners in rough, salty language while the Tennessee Three roared through fast-paced versions of the folk ballad "Wreck of the Old 97" and Cash's 1956 hit "I Walk the Line." The mood in the prison was raised to a fever pitch, audible to the album's hearer, when Cash sang "San Quentin" a second time. "All of the guards

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<sup>43</sup> For comparative "platinum" and "gold" status of country albums over the years, see Paul Kingsbury, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Country Music* 609

were backing up towards the doors,” Bob Johnston recalls, “they’d already clicked their guns. They’re looking down with their scopes on...[the inmates] were on top of the tables. They were going ‘WUUHHH, UUUHHH.’ They couldn’t get them to stop it.”<sup>44</sup> In a 1988 interview Cash remembered, “during the second rendition of that song all I would have had to do was say, ‘Break!’ and they were gone, man. They were ready! I’ve got a book called *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* that I’ve studied for years. I knew I had that prison audience where all I had to do was say, ‘Take over! Break!’ and they would have. Those guards knew it, too. I was tempted.”<sup>45</sup>

What he launched into instead was black gospel composer Thomas Dorsey’s “Peace in the Valley,” a humble, solitary soul’s prayer of hope, with rich pacific imagery: “well the bear will be gentle/ and the wolf will be tamed/ and the lion shall lay day with the lamb/ and the beasts from the wild/ will be led by a child/ and I’ll be changed, changed from this creature/ that I am.” With the remarkable alto of Anita Carter in antiphonal juxtaposition with his low baritone, and with the chorus of the entire Carter Family (only June had been at the Folsom show) in unison, the song offered a glimpse of divine peace at the end of struggle and personal confinement. Country singer Red Foley had scored a hit with “Peace in the Valley” in 1951, and Cash and the Carter Family had recorded it in 1962. It may also have become a regular feature of their stage show in the 60s, like “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord.”<sup>46</sup> In the prison setting, as the conclusion of the *At San Quentin* album, “Peace in the Valley” was infused with new meaning. Like “San Quentin” it became a prisoner’s song, but whereas “San Quentin” raged at confinement, “Peace” sang of hopeful longing for an identity beyond present personal

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<sup>44</sup> Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 160

<sup>45</sup> Bill Flanagan, “Johnny Cash, American” *Musician* May 1988

<sup>46</sup> Bill Malone, *Country Music USA* 206; Frederick Danker, “The Repertory and Style of a Country Singer” *Journal of American Folklore* 324

condition in a world built on violence. Like “Greystone Chapel,” its prison performance extended Christian belonging to those whom the social order had cast out.<sup>47</sup>

In the context of the late 60s, these gospel song conclusions to the prison albums were democratic Christian statements. The beginnings of war in Europe were the context informing Georgia native and migrant to Chicago Dorsey in his 1939 composition of “Peace,” and New South structures of power and cultural images were the real-world setting in which rural Protestants developed staple themes of Jesus the lowly Man of Sorrows, the hollowness of wealth, and a divine favoritism towards the poor and humble (chapter 7). In the prison performances Cash took some of the spirit of that rural Protestantism and imagined it into the 60s context of varied democratic strivings.

On several songs on subsequent albums *Hello, I’m Johnny Cash* (1970, #1 Country, “gold”), *The Johnny Cash Show* (1970, #1 Country, “gold”), and *Man in Black* (1971, #1 Country) he pursued this democratic Christian vision.<sup>48</sup> *Hello* closed with folk revivalist Christopher Wren’s “Jesus Was a Carpenter.” Wren wrote the song at Cash’s house while doing research for his biography, and like Mark Romanek with “Hurt,” the setting surely played some role in creating a song that expressed Cash’s artistic vision.<sup>49</sup> Jesus in Wren’s song was a lowly figure who kept company with the downtrodden: “he walked among the poor and he stopped to touch the dying/ and he built his house from people just like these.” Past narrative moved into present critique, and the song asked of today’s “mighty churches,” “would he be a guest on Sunday, a vagrant on a Monday/ with the doors locked tight against his kind, you know?”<sup>50</sup> Cash’s own composition “What is Truth?,” a #3 single in 1970, echoed this query, taking Pontius

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<sup>47</sup> Johnny Cash, *At San Quentin* (Columbia, 1969)

<sup>48</sup> Joel Whitburn, *Top Country Albums* 29; www.riaa.com

<sup>49</sup> Steve Turner, *Man Called Cash* 147

<sup>50</sup> Johnny Cash, “Jesus Was a Carpenter” *Hello, I’m Johnny Cash* (Columbia, 1970)

Pilate's question into the present. On "What is Truth?" Cash allied himself with the young who were questioning the status quo through the anti-war movement and experimental music and dress. To those who showed no openness to the ferment of the time, he asked, "could it be that girls and boys/ are trying to be heard above your noise" and in the chorus he sang sympathetically that "the lonely voice of youth/ cries, 'what is truth?'"<sup>51</sup>

"Here Was a Man," Cash's treatment of country songwriters Johnny Bond and Tex Ritter's composition, was a spoken word narration that closed the *Johnny Cash Show* album. That album captured the creative spirit of his television show, with working-person songs framed by the "Come Along and Ride This Train" medley, and its closing with a gospel number mirrored the show's custom (which itself mirrored the Cash troupe's stage show).<sup>52</sup> On "Here Was a Man" Cash told of Jesus without naming him, describing a man born in poverty and obscurity, without any formal education or notable marks of greatness, who worked with his hands before three years of traveling to preach, who met with revile and ridicule, and who met a shameful and violent death. But this lowly working man of sorrows was marked by "divine purpose," and the recitation became a rebuke to hierarchical definitions of "greatness."<sup>53</sup> The unnamed Man of Sorrows was also the central character in the doleful "Look for Me" on *Man in Black*. The song was the composition of Glen Sherley and his former Folsom cellmate Harlan Sanders. Cash had taken a special personal interest in Sherley after meeting him briefly at the close of the Folsom concert, and with Floyd Gressett he had helped lobby for Sherley's and Sanders' parole. Upon their release in winter 1971 he hired them to work for his publishing company, and to Cash Sherley became an embodiment of Christian redemption as translated into

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<sup>51</sup> Johnny Cash, "What is Truth?" (Columbia, 1970)

<sup>52</sup> Danker, "Repertory and Style" 324

<sup>53</sup> Johnny Cash, "Here Was a Man" *The Johnny Cash Show* (Columbia, 1970)

social reincorporation.<sup>54</sup> On “Look for Me” Cash sang of a Jesus to be found in company with the lowly and in the crisis moments of human experience: “look for me there in the hand that drops a penny in the cup/ and in the hand that lends its strength to help the lonely through the night and lift the beggar up/ he said children look for me/...look for me there in the chill of dawn and in the new born eyes/ of a baby left discarded by a girl who could offer nothing more than a small back alley prayer/ he said children look for me/ look for me.”<sup>55</sup>

Even as Cash developed a musical persona that imagined basic themes in rural Protestantism into the cultural ferment of the late 60s and early 70s, there were two critical ways in which that religious culture showed its distinct imprint: its democratic imagery was centered on a humble Jesus, and there was an abiding awareness of human limitation. Musical expressions of the ferment of the era were diverse: from Bob Dylan’s generational/wheel of fortune imagery in “The Times They Are A-Changin” (1963), to the racial pride and cultural nationalism of James Brown’s “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” (1968), to the escapist psychedelics of the Beatles’ *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). In Cash’s string of highly successful albums from 1968 to 1971, the core of the democratic vision was always connected to Christianity, embodied most basically in the lowly, humble Jesus. Not that Jesus was an alien presence in the counterculture: the theatrical musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970) and *Godspell* (1971) both dramatized the Jesus story in a contemporary idiom. But *Superstar* depicted Jesus as a confused man, a would-be prophet with delusions, while in *Godspell* he was a teacher of a uncannily hippy-ish way of life, one that people should practice with the optimism embodied in the song “Day by Day.” That sense of optimism, of confidence that the world really could be changed in fundamental ways, was of course intrinsic to much of the ferment of the

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<sup>54</sup> For more on Sherley’s story, one of high early promise and sad, pitiful regression ending in suicide in 1978, see Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* 162-169

<sup>55</sup> Johnny Cash, “Look for Me” *Man in Black* (Columbia, 1971)

time, from the Port Huron statement of SDS to Martin Luther King's speech at the March on Washington. Cash's religious songs, and his music more generally in these years, was always marked by limit. The tone of the gospel songs was tentative, not triumphant—whether they were glimmers of hope in the midst of candid awareness of confinement, like “Greystone Chapel” and “Peace in the Valley,” or evocations of an enigmatic Jesus whose way was at odds with that of the world, as in “Jesus Was a Carpenter” or “Look for Me.” And in Cash's overall oeuvre in these years, they were always balanced by songs depicting the harder side of life, songs like the prison protest anthem “San Quentin,” “Route 1 Box 144” about a young soldier who dies in obscurity, Kris Kristofferson's ode of morning-after despair “Sunday Morning Coming Down,” and Dick Feller's eloquent, doleful ballad “Orphan of the Road.”

A democratic favoritism towards the “ordinary” working-class person and an abiding feeling of human finitude and limitation have been, a number of interpreters have pointed out, central themes in commercial country music, at least until the 1990s. Bill Malone distinguishes country music from the more radical folk tradition of overt protest, but he also writes that “the strong strain of populism that erupted in the 1890s” never left the rural sensibility and that the medium speaks most intimately to and for the white working class. He also argues that the music has, until the past few decades, expressed “a working-class southern view: that little could be accomplished and that one should be aware of limits in this life”<sup>56</sup> Maybe simple experience or a vague “folk wisdom” are sufficient causes to explain these themes, in both the old rural South

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<sup>56</sup> Bill Malone, *Country Music USA* 130; Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin'* chapter 2 (“I'm a Small Time Laboring Man”); Malone, “The Rural South Moves to the City: Country Music Since World War II” in Douglas Hurt, ed. *The Rural South Since World War II* 106. See also Curtis Ellison, *Country Music Culture: From Hard Times to Heaven* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995) on limit and Tex Sample, *White Soul: Country Music, the Church, and Working Americans* on “populist anarchism” and living “up against the wall.” Bill Friskies-Warren and David Cantwell's interpretation of “Folsom Prison Blues” expresses both these dynamics. They argue that the song is about “the confinement of class” and “the unfairness of it all...especially the way those fat cats ride on the backs of people like [the imprisoned narrator]” *Heartaches by the Number: Country Music's 500 Greatest Singles* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 2003):14

and in the musical form that has had a close relation to the white working class with roots in that rural South. Fully pursuing that question is outside the scope of this project, but it's an arguable point as to whether or not sheer experience can generate a language to describe counter-hegemonic ideas (democratic favoritism or awareness of limit), whether folk wisdom is something that emerges organically from the people without being informed by past tradition or present experience of marginality. At any rate, another of Malone's arguments—"country music has been subjected to no greater influence than southern religious life"—suggests that democratic favoritism and awareness of limit may have emerged as articulated themes insofar as religious language informed everyday experience.<sup>57</sup> If we depart from some entrenched assumptions about "southern religious life" and try to examine the people's culture more carefully, the cultural resources to talk about limit (chapter 6) and favoritism towards the lowly (chapter 7) may appear less elusive. It is clear, though, that as Cash evoked these ideas in a way that caught the attention of many in popular culture, he did so with feet firmly set in country music and the older religious sensibility of the rural South.

It may have been precisely these markers of difference that made Cash appealing to non-country listeners who gave him so much attention in the period 1968-71; he was both part of the cultural ferment and a figure from a world quite removed from it. Jewish Minnesotan Bob Dylan, whose knowledge of the rural South and its Protestant culture came through the mediation of the music he absorbed, reflected after Cash's death that well before he came to know him through folk revival circles in the 60s, he was struck by Cash's entrancing foreignness. "In '55 or '56 'I Walk the Line' played all summer on the radio," he wrote, "and it was different than anything else you had ever heard. The record sounded like a voice from the middle of the earth...It was profound, and so was the tone of it, every line; deep and rich, awesome and mysterious all at

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<sup>57</sup> Malone, *Country Music USA* 10



once.”<sup>58</sup> New Yorker and leading folk revivalist Pete Seeger introduced Cash as the real thing when he and June Carter made an appearance on his local TV show *Rainbow Quest* in 1965. “I was never a cotton farmer. I never walked behind a mule,” he began in his introduction of Cash who, high as a kite and fidgeting incessantly, sang the Carter Family’s “Worried Man Blues,” his own “Five Feet High and Rising,” and the folk gospel staple “I Am a Pilgrim.”<sup>59</sup>

However, a number of interpreters have argued for Cash’s distance from the social ferment of the era, musically represented by figures like Dylan and Seeger. Bill Malone argued that country songs of the 60s and early 70s were “rarely liberal in any conventionally defined sense,” and then zooming in on Cash, wrote that aside from his *Bitter Tears* album “devoted to the plight” of native Americans, he “gave no meaningful support to any of the other liberal causes of the decade.”<sup>60</sup> Cash displayed “a rather vague brand of tolerance toward dissent” for a time, Malone also claimed, but his real sympathies were articulated in his 1974 song “Ragged Old Flag,” a statement of “uncompromising patriotism.”<sup>61</sup> James Cobb argued that despite longings of those outside country music to find in it a “genuine spokesman of the proletariat,” it seemed a musical defense of “authoritarianism, repression, and excessive use of force.” Cash was briefly “country music’s first great hope of the counterculture,” “country music’s Bob Dylan,” but his commercials for American Oil and respectability bred of success dashed such

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<sup>58</sup> Bob Dylan reminiscence *Rolling Stone* 933 (October 23,2003):74

<sup>59</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 123-124

<sup>60</sup> Bill Malone, *Country Music USA* 300

<sup>61</sup> Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’* 241. Malone also seeks to debunk the story that anti-Republican ideas inspired Cash to refuse to sing “Okie from Muscogee” and “Welfare Cadillac,” as a Nixon aide had requested, for his April 1970 show at the White House. *Time* argued that it was because of Cash’s “pro-underdog sympathies,” but Malone argues that it was simply because Cash didn’t know the songs, and that “liberal writers had attempted to create a conflict of interests where none existed.” *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’* 243. Contrast this with Cash’s own account in his autobiography, Cash with Carr, *Cash* 286. There he also reveals that he did not vote for Nixon either time. *Cash* 289

hopes quickly.<sup>62</sup> More broadly, Dorothy Horstman claimed that “a review of the body of hillbilly recordings from 1923 to 1995 reveals few songs of genuine ‘protest’—expressions of communal outrage at economic or social injustices, or appeals for action against them.”<sup>63</sup> Richard Peterson charged that country music lyrics have typically evoked “class consciousness,” but have quickly diffused or dissipated it through appeals to such forces as patriotism, religion, and “Cinderella dreams.” It is thus pervaded by a notable “class unconsciousness.”<sup>64</sup>

But these interpreters have conceded too much by imagining Cash (and perhaps country music more broadly) in categories that fail to capture the dynamics of his persona in those contentious years.<sup>65</sup> Cash was not a liberal (either New Deal or New Left), nor a proletarian hero with a protest spirit rooted in class consciousness. But that does not mean that his art and persona in the creative years 1968-1971 were “conservative” or easily serviceable to the Republicans’ backlash campaign of “law-and-order” and “restoration of the old-fashioned values.”<sup>66</sup> The Jesus of “Jesus Was a Carpenter,” “Here Was a Man,” and “Look for Me” was hardly an ally in hierarchical retrenchment. Neither were he nor the gospel song conclusions to the prison albums vague cultural expressions that merely tolerated the insurgency of the era. They were fruits of a distinct Christian vision, one that Cash was personally indebted to in his rural past and one that—as commentators in both mainstream and countercultural media noted at the time—he did skillfully bring into artistic engagement with the era’s democratic aspirations. That was done in

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<sup>62</sup> James Cobb, “From Muscogee to Luckenbach: Country Music and the ‘Southernization’ of America” in *Redefining Southern Culture* 82

<sup>63</sup> Dorothy Horstman, *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy* 239

<sup>64</sup> Richard Peterson, “Class Unconsciousness in Country Music” in Melton McLaurin and Richard Peterson, eds. *You Wrote My Life: Lyrical Themes in Country Music* 36,47

<sup>65</sup> Tex Sample argues that even as a highly commercial medium, country music has a special meaning for the white working class who are its core constituency. “The music is a forum for the articulation of resistance to a dominant world where their lives, their ways, and their dignity are constantly under attack. Often accused of being apolitical or at the very least ‘conservative,’ I shall argue instead, that it embodies a traditional politics with anarchistic overtones of a populist sort.” Sample, *White Soul: Country Music, the Church, and Working Americans* 15

<sup>66</sup> Charles Colson, *Born Again* 62-63. Colson was a prominent Nixon strategist who became a Neo-Evangelical during the Watergate crisis.

the elusive art form of music, not in the transparent prose of position papers, but then so was the semiotic resistance of the oral religious culture of Cash's youth. Furthermore, as the remarkable sales of his albums and singles in that period indicate, thousands upon thousands of core country listeners were buying his records and sanctioning his experiments with rural tradition; Cash was hardly forsaken by the country world in his musical extensions of rural Christianity into the spirit of the 60s.<sup>67</sup>

Cash's greatest expression of his vision in those contentious years was his 1971 composition "Man in Black," a #3 Country single and the title track on his last #1 Country album until the 2006 release of *A Hundred Highways*.<sup>68</sup> In his 2006 memoir Marshall Grant singled this song out for special praise, writing "One of the best-written songs I've ever heard is 'The Man in Black,' which John wrote in 1971. We recorded it later that year, and it just fit John to a T. It's about a man who wears black to remind us of all of the unfortunate people out there that life has ground under—the poor, the hungry, the elderly, the sick, the prisoners—the underdogs that John always wanted to help. It was such a personal song, and audiences could see that, and when we performed it onstage, people would just be mesmerized by his deep, expressive baritone voice."<sup>69</sup> The song was inspired, Cash wrote in his 1975 autobiography *Man in Black*, by the volley of questions that reporters were asking him about some of the burning issues of the day—the war in Vietnam, the counterculture, the women's movement.<sup>70</sup> The journalists who asked these

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<sup>67</sup> They also were buying one of Cash's more overt protest songs, "The Ballad of Ira Hayes," before the Pop audience was. In July 1964, before Cash's famous letter in *Billboard*, country trade journal *Music City News* noted that the single was "already a big seller, and it sounds as if every radio station in the country is playing it." *Music City News* July 1964 p7. Cash's letter did push it up the Country charts to #3, but it never placed on the Pop charts. See *Billboard* August 15, 1964 to September 26, 1964. "Ragged Old Flag," by contrast, peaked at #31 on the Country charts. See Joel Whitburn, *Billboard Book of Top 40 Country Hits* 68-69

<sup>68</sup> Whitburn, *Top Country Albums* 29-30; Whitburn, *Billboard Book* 69

<sup>69</sup> Grant with Zar, *I Was There When It Happened* 194

<sup>70</sup> Cash, *Man in Black* 146; For a sample of press at the time that was trying to get Cash's "position" on these issues, see Tom Dearmore, "First Angry Man of Country Singers" September 21, 1969; Paul Hemphill, *The Nashville Sound*; Dorothy Gallagher, "Johnny Cash" August 1971

questions were, overwhelmingly, outside the channels of country music, and this was itself testament to the fact that in the years 68-71 Cash's music and persona were engaging creatively with social concerns of the day, even as the sense of surprise and slight exoticism in their treatment of Cash ("it won't do to talk about Cash as down-home fascist country pie," Richard Goldstein wrote) showed his clear identity as a country figure, a "cotton-field hand turned millionaire singer" in Tom Dearmore's words.<sup>71</sup> In "Man in Black" Cash answered these attempts to pin him down by creating a persona, a mysterious liminal figure who embodied limit and a democratic favoritism towards the lowly and forgotten.

In his early rockabilly years Cash had worn a variety of outfits. Photographs from his first show at the Grand Ole Opry in 1956 show him in a white Western-style sport jacket that his mother had made, and the series of memorable album covers for Columbia in the 1960s presented him in costumes befitting the lyrical themes on the album's songs: a Western gunslinger on *Ride This Train* (1960), a miner on *Blood, Sweat and Tears* (1963), an Indian on *Bitter Tears* (1964), a hobo on *Orange Blossom Special* (1964), and a cowboy on *Ballads of the True West* (1965). In his stage show in the early 60s Cash did begin to wear simple, stark black suits, and Marshall Grant recalls that Cash and the Tennessee Three had been fitted for performing clothes by Nudie Cohn, the famous Hollywood designer of the elaborate rhinestone costumes favored by many country singers of the time. Offhandedly Cash told Cohn to make his suit all-black, and later in performance, the color seemed to create a distinct aura that was not lost on Cash. "It just sort of grew up over time as more people saw him perform," Grant recalls. "And, like our shows, nothing about it was planned, nothing was thought out—John's powerful onstage image just slowly evolved from a spontaneous remark he once made: 'Just make all of

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<sup>71</sup> Goldstein, "Something Rude Showing" and Dearmore, "First Angry Man" in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 89,92

mine black.”<sup>72</sup> Bill Malone also suggests other influences, noting that in the early 60s Cash developed “a kind of Harry Belafonte style of stage behavior, dressing in black and projecting a dramatic and sensual presence that seemed reminiscent of method-school acting.”<sup>73</sup> The cover of the 1962 album *The Sound of Johnny Cash* captures this dramatic presence of the stage shows, and concert photographs throughout the later 60s unanimously show Cash in three-piece black suits.

Various country singers back to Jimmie Rodgers—“the Singing Brakeman”—had cultivated an image through a performing nickname. In 1962 Cash’s manager Saul Holiff billed him as “America’s Foremost Singing Storyteller” for a major appearance at Carnegie Hall. Holiff and Cash were clearly hoping to capitalize on the historical ballad craze spawned by the Kingston Trio’s 1959 hit “Tom Dooley,” and Cash drew on the country past by dressing as Jimmie Rodgers, in denim coveralls and carrying a train lantern.<sup>74</sup> Holiff’s appellation (and the Rodgers costume) did not stick, but Cash did develop an enduring image as a historical folk bard, one who told stories of the American past from the point of view of those who labored with their hands.<sup>75</sup> That image—evoked by many in the wake of Cash’s death—was clearly overshadowed, however, by the “Man in Black” persona that Cash created when he coined that phrase in 1971, reading meaning back into an almost decade-old practice and framing future public appearances for the rest of his career.

It’s probable but not definite that Cash had in mind the image of a preacher when he composed the song. The album, which he himself produced after Bob Johnston’s departure from Columbia, featured a Cash-written duet with Billy Graham called “The Preacher Said, ‘Jesus

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<sup>72</sup> Grant with Zar, *I Was There* 100-101

<sup>73</sup> Malone, *Country Music USA* 282

<sup>74</sup> Malone, *Country Music USA* 279-285; Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 115

<sup>75</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 112-124

Said,” which celebrated the figure of the preacher and led up in the chorus to Graham’s spoken-word readings from the New Testament. It’s likely that Cash knew the 1963 song “The Reverend Mr. Black,” written by country songwriter Billy Edd Wheeler and performed by both the Kingston Trio and Faron Young.<sup>76</sup> The song told of a strange “man in black,” a poor, horse-riding preacher whose austere appearance hid a gentle spirit, who pushed people into inwardness by preaching of the “Lonesome Valley.” (see chapter 5) Wheeler was surely drawing on his own rural past in Boone County, West Virginia in the 30s and 40s, as he also did in songs like “Ode to the Little Brown Shack Out Back,” and scattered evidence suggests that wearing black was standard for rural preachers of the New South era.<sup>77</sup> In 1897 W.P. Trent had noted emergent differences between rural and urban churches, and he wrote that in urban churches “clergymen have stopped preaching in black gowns or swallow-tailed clothes.” He wondered how long it would take for this new practice to reach the countryside: “who knows but that, in the course of a few generations, [the preacher] may get rid of the long black coat and the lugubrious countenance which make him an object of conspicuous solemnity as he walks to church, surrounded by his numerous progeny?”<sup>78</sup> Alan Lomax noted that the remarkable elderly black preacher he came to know in the 30s was “black-garbed,” and Hazel Motes, the anti-preacher who is the central character in Flannery O’Connor’s 1952 *Wise Blood*, was a refugee from the fast-declining rural community of his youth, his rural background and religious longing marked by his “stiff black broad-brimmed hat,” one “an elderly country preacher would wear.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Cash covered several Wheeler compositions, including “Jackson” and “Blistered.” Cash later sang “The Reverend Mr. Black” on his 1981 album *The Baron*.

<sup>77</sup> Malone, *Country Music USA* 303-304

<sup>78</sup> W.P. Trent, “Tendencies of Higher Life in the South” *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1897):777-778

<sup>79</sup> Alan Lomax, *The Rainbow Sign: A Southern Documentary* 121; Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood* in Sally Fitzgerald, ed. *Collected Works* 3

At any rate, whether this practice was far more common than documentation suggests, whether or not Cash had Wheeler's song in mind, his "Man in Black" was, like the figure of the called preacher in rural Protestantism (chapter 6), a symbolic persona that embodied elusive truth through pointing away from himself:

I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down  
Living in the hopeless, hungry side of town  
I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime  
But is there because he's a victim of the times  
I wear the black for those who've never read  
Or listened to the words that Jesus said  
About the road to happiness through love and charity  
Why you'd think He's talking straight to you and me  
Well we're doing mighty fine I do suppose  
In our streak of lightning cars and fancy clothes  
But just so we're reminded of the ones who are held back  
Up front there ought to be a Man in Black  
I wear it for the sick and lonely old  
For the reckless ones whose bad trip left them cold  
I wear the black in mourning for the lives that could have been  
Each week we lose a hundred fine young men...<sup>80</sup>

Cash premiered the song on a special episode of his television show in February 1971, filmed not at the Ryman Auditorium as usual but rather on the campus of Vanderbilt University. Framing the show's song numbers were conversations between Cash and a cohort of students on the issues of the day, and when he performed the song in a campus auditorium there were alternating shots of student reactions to lines in the song. It was a clear statement of identification and engagement with the young, like "What is Truth?," and lyrical references to bad trips and young men killed in Vietnam located it in the context of the day.

That is how the song is often interpreted: as a social statement in the spirit of the 60s, a reminder of the downtrodden of society.<sup>81</sup> Certainly that element is there, but the variety of groups here are not just the poor and oppressed, but any who push up against a wall of limitation:

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<sup>80</sup> Johnny Cash, "Man in Black" *Man in Black* (Columbia, 1971)

<sup>81</sup> Bill Malone, *Don't Get Above Your Raisin'* 138; see also the variety of press in the wake of Cash's death

the elderly, the sick, junkies, prisoners, those who aren't following the way of life modeled by Jesus. All demonstrate human lack, and the Man in Black wears his color of negation as an unpleasant mirror, a reminder of limitation and finitude. He is allied democratically with all those suffering lack, like the Jesus of "Jesus Was a Carpenter" and "Look for Me," an advocate and friend for those on the margins of society or on the margins of human well-being and wholeness.

The Man in Black is thus a liminal figure, but quite different from another contemporaneous liminal figure with roots in the older South. Charles Reagan Wilson argues that "the King," the persona that Elvis Presley developed in the late 60s and who appeared in the 70s in flamboyant multi-colored jump suits, massive gold belts, and face-concealing sunglasses, was a liminal figure with powerful meaning for working-class southern whites with memories of poverty and marginality. The "Elvis Icon," Wilson writes, possessed meaning as an "attempt to transcend the past" and celebrate the new options of a consumer culture. "Given access to plentiful American goods in an age of increasing southern prosperity, the Elvis Icon teaches that they should be enjoyed."<sup>82</sup> Cash's Man in Black, by contrast, was not a repudiation of and victory over that past of poverty and social marginality, but rather an evocation of central themes from the religious culture of that rural past—a sense of human limit and finitude, democratic favoritism for the lowly, and (likely) the liminal figure of the rural preacher—in the late 60s-early 70s context of social ferment. By dramatizing various forms of incompleteness, the Man in Black called for social change, yet with a sense that striving without full realization would always be the rule:

Well, there's things that never will be right I know  
And things need changing everywhere you go

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<sup>82</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, "The Iconography of Elvis" in Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis* 133



But 'til we start to make a move to make a few things right  
You'll never see me wear a suit of white  
Oh, I'd love to wear a rainbow every day  
And tell the world that everything's okay  
But I'll try to carry off a little darkness on my back  
'Til things are brighter, I'm the Man in Black

On the heels of "Man in Black," with the significant income he had accumulated from record sales, concerts, and television commercials, Cash embarked on an ambitious, experimental project in the fall of 1971, a film that would present his portrait of the life of Jesus. It was intended to do what the 1968 *Holy Land* album had not really succeeded in doing: depict the story of Jesus in a way that evoked the past while speaking to the present, like the oral sermons with their blurred line between ancient past and New South present, with a Jesus who could meander through the southern countryside and see rural people at work.<sup>83</sup> To this end, Cash wrote a travelogue-style script with Larry Murray (who had written for his television show), hired cinema verite-trained Robert Elfstrom (who had directed *The Man, His World, and His Music*), and put together a score of songs by younger songwriters Kris Kristofferson, Christopher Wren, Larry Gatlin, and Joe South, new gospel songs that he hoped would speak "to people today."<sup>84</sup> To retain complete artistic control, he put up \$500,000 of his own money, funding both a thirty-person film crew who traveled to Israel in fall 1971, and studio time to edit and weave in the musical score throughout the better part of 1972.<sup>85</sup> Twentieth Century Fox bought distribution rights to the completed film, called *The Gospel Road* after a Christopher Wren composition, and to help promote the film Cash traveled widely throughout the country in 1973 to make personal appearances at screenings.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> On Cash's sense that *Holy Land* had not fulfilled his initial vision of it, see Peter McCabe and Jack Killion, "Interview with Johnny Cash" *Country Music* 5/73 in Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire* 127; Cash, *Man in Black* 157

<sup>84</sup> McCabe and Killion in *Ring of Fire* 128-129

<sup>85</sup> George Vecsey, "Cash's 'Gospel Road' Film is Renaissance for Him" *New York Times* December 13, 1973 in *Ring of Fire* 124; McCabe and Killion in *Ring of Fire* 130

<sup>86</sup> Cash, *Man in Black* 163-164

*Gospel Road* mixes direct narration and commentary from Cash himself, who appears in solid black clothing in sites like Mount Arabel and the Sea of Galilee, with scenes in the life of Jesus. Director Robert Elfstrom plays Jesus, June Carter Cash is Mary Magdalene, Evangel Temple friends Jimmy Snow and Larry Lee are Pontius Pilate and John the Baptist, and a spontaneously assembled supporting cast fills out the scenes in a minimalist production. Jesus in *Gospel Road* is an earthy man of the people, special friend to the lowly and outcast, the “poor and underprivileged,” at odds with the religious establishment. He roams the beautifully-photographed countryside, frolics on the beach with children, leads a rambunctious band of disciples, and takes a special (maybe even romantic) interest in the former prostitute Mary Magdalene. At the same time he is a divine messenger, a worker of wonders, and his life culminates in a violent death that is imbued with divine meaning as a sacrifice. The rolling theme song invites the audience to come along on the gospel road with Jesus, and scenes of his crucifixion are transported into contemporary American cities, visualizing the idea that this is not ancient history but a story with present meaning.<sup>87</sup>

In his 1997 memoir, Cash singled out *Gospel Road* as “the most ambitious project I’ve ever attempted,” and biographer Michael Streissguth argues that the film was a “unique and artistic statement.” “Few, if any, of his peers had stepped from their regular recording careers to pursue a new genre,” Streissguth writes, “and the fact that Cash did so is a tribute to his continued desire to challenge himself by reaching for new spheres.”<sup>88</sup> But, Streissguth also notes, the film met with a chilled public reaction that surely was deeply disappointing to Cash.<sup>89</sup> In *Newsweek* Kenneth Woodward wrote favorably of the film in an advance screening, noting its rich evocation of the “craggy Israeli landscape” and its carefully-worked score of “original

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<sup>87</sup> *The Gospel Road*, dir. Robert Elfstrom (Twentieth Century Fox, 1973)

<sup>88</sup> Cash with Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 308; Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 184

<sup>89</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 183

gospel songs that are bound to become classics.” He also perceptively noted a “rural emphasis [that] necessarily yields a Jesus who seems more individualistic than Biblical texts would warrant. But He is fully consonant with the lonesome spirituality of country music”—and, one might add, with the *via negativa* in the rural Protestant South that produced such country music.<sup>90</sup> But Fox treated the film as a “specialized” piece of limited appeal, and a Fox executive told the *New York Times* that the film was “good quality, but it has a very strong Fundamentalist opinion... We’ll schedule it where we get requests.”<sup>91</sup> Those local requests were, as it turned out, less than hearty. The film met with only “moderate success” in the South, where it first circulated, and then with even less as it moved outside the region.<sup>92</sup> Nor were listeners that interested in the songs that Cash had carefully assembled for the score. The *Gospel Road* album of songs and dialogue peaked at #12 on the Country charts, the worst showing of any Cash album to date, and its single, “Children,” topped at #30 on the Country singles chart. Neither made a dent in the Pop charts.<sup>93</sup>

By the time both film and album appeared to the public, Cash was being typecast, in both country and non-country media, as a strictly religious performer, one or two steps away from everyday human concerns and the broader themes he had once sung about. Some of his own statements and actions aided in this typecasting: his well-publicized joining of the Assembly of God Evangel Temple in Nashville in May 1971, his prominent appearance with Billy Graham at Campus Crusade for Christ’s huge 1972 “Explo” rally in Dallas, and his performance as headliner at the 1972 inaugural show of “Grand Ole Gospel Hour,” a country gospel show in the Ryman Auditorium hosted by Evangel Temple’s pastor Jimmy Snow. In his 1973 *The New*

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<sup>90</sup> Kenneth Woodward, “A Country Jesus” *Newsweek* 81 (January 29, 1973):50

<sup>91</sup> Vecsey, “Cash’s ‘Gospel Road’” in *Ring of Fire* 125

<sup>92</sup> Vecsey in *Ring of Fire* 124

<sup>93</sup> Whitburn, *Top Country Albums* 30; Whitburn, *Billboard Book* 69

*Johnny Cash* Pentecostal writer Charles Paul Conn quoted Cash saying, “I don’t have a career anymore. What I have now is a ministry. Everything I have and everything I do is given completely to Jesus Christ now. I’ve lived all my life for the devil up ‘til now, and from here on I’m going to live it for the Lord.”<sup>94</sup> In a 1973 interview for *Country Music* magazine, Peter McCabe and Jack Killion asked him, “do you think your audience has changed since you’ve moved more toward gospel music?,” and in the *New York Times* that same year George Vecsey noted how Cash appeared so much healthier than he had in the 60s and attributed it, in Cash’s own words, to his “coming back to Jesus.”<sup>95</sup> In Cash’s 1975 autobiography *Man in Black*, the title seemed to evoke not a liminal figure with democratic sympathies and an awareness of limit, but rather an austere person who shunned ordinary human “fun” and who drew sharp lines between the way of sinners and the way of saints (see chapter 8). There Cash wrote in the introduction, “Some like to say, ‘Johnny Cash got religion,’ and put me into a category out of their sphere. They pretend to hide their whiskey or marijuana when I walk into a dressing room. Then they laugh. The truth falls hard and heavy: If you’re going to be a Christian, you’re going to change. You’re going to lose some old friends, not because you want to, but because you need to.”<sup>96</sup>

Still, Cash had not become an evangelist, nor was he strictly a gospel singer. As he pointed out in the *Country Music* interview, “you know, the accent is not all that much on gospel music,” and it wasn’t: his own compositions in the years surrounding *Gospel Road* dwelt on themes of working people, of loss and limit, that they always had. “Country Trash” satirized a term of ridicule from Cash’s youth, “Saturday Night in Hickman County” told of earthy pleasures in the rural county where Cash owned a farm, “Don’t Go Near the Water” warned of environmental damage, and “Lonesome to the Bone” evoked post-Saturday night despair in the

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<sup>94</sup> Charles Paul Conn, *The New Johnny Cash* 29

<sup>95</sup> McCabe and Killion, “Interview with Johnny Cash” and Vecsey, “Cash’s ‘Gospel Road’” in *Ring of Fire* 133,124

<sup>96</sup> Cash, *Man in Black* 6

style of “Sunday Morning Coming Down.” But Cash was starting to lose significant numbers of listeners in 1973, the year that *Gospel Road* premiered, and the image of Cash as an otherworldly religious person became central. Journalist Patrick Carr remembered that when he met Cash in the early 70s, he assumed (wrongly, as he found out) he would find a strictly religious man, “a bit of a drag,” whose “most public affiliation, with Billy Graham, [was] deeply unappealing to the boomer-hippie appetite.”<sup>97</sup> Critic Richard Goldstein, who had lauded Cash in 1969 for defying classification, was whistling a different tune by 1973, when his essay “My Country Music Problem—And Yours” charged that country was a “musical extension of the Nixon administration.”<sup>98</sup> Cash’s one time apartment mate and (lifelong) friend Waylon Jennings told Peter Guralnick in 1974 that Cash was “sold out to religion now,” and journalist Nick Tosches, as noted in chapter 1, skewered Cash in his 1977 *Country* as “offensively pious... a particularly tedious act. The strongest drink Cash serves at his parties is nonalcoholic fruit punch.”<sup>99</sup> Even a careful historian of country music like Bill Malone could write as if Cash’s country career had come to an end after he joined Evangel Temple. “In the years that followed this renewal,” Malone wrote, “Cash somehow managed to maintain an active performing career while also appearing frequently as a guest and performer in Billy Graham’s revivalistic crusades, producing a movie about Jesus called *The Glory Road* [sic], and writing a novel about St. Paul called *The Man in White* [sic].”<sup>100</sup>

Thus *Gospel Road* did not appear in 1973 as complicated art wherein past religious tradition engaged with contemporary ferment, but rather as evangelization—and evangelization

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<sup>97</sup> Patrick Carr, “Johnny Cash: The Sprit is Willing” *Journal of Country Music* 20

<sup>98</sup> Richard Goldstein, “My Country Music Problem—And Yours” *Mademoiselle* 77:2 (June 1973) quoted in Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin*’ 244

<sup>99</sup> Peter Guralnick, *Lost Highway: Journeys and Arrivals of American Musicians* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1999):212; Nick Tosches, *Country: The Biggest Music in America* 133

<sup>100</sup> Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin* 111

to the already converted. Streissguth notes that after its torpid public reception, *Gospel Road* “settled into the church basements of America, where it flickered for many years on white painted walls and portable screens.”<sup>101</sup> Cash’s commercial viability and, more importantly, his artistic creativity, richly evident in the years 1968-1971, floundered after 1973. He held high status as a living “legend,” “the face of country music,” but this rested on past work, not present creativity.<sup>102</sup> Gospel songs, which had appeared in creative juxtaposition with other songs on his 68-71 albums, actually became less evident on his regular albums, despite the strictly religious image. *One Piece at a Time* (1976), the one Cash album to place well on the Country charts in the twenty years after *Gospel Road*, contained no gospel material, nor did the string of lackluster albums from the late 70s to the late 80s.

Not that Cash’s drive for religious expression weakened in those years. Around the same time as *One Piece at a Time*’s success, Cash began sketching ideas for a novel about the apostle Paul. If music, even the deliberately contemporary songs of *Gospel Road*, couldn’t resonate with the public, perhaps other forms could. But work on the novel bogged down and stalled as Cash, beginning in 1977, relapsed into a severe period of drug addiction and personal deterioration. His own commitment to crafting music also deteriorated, hitting a nadir in 1984 with the single “The Chicken in Black.” It was “intentionally atrocious,” Cash wrote in his 1997 memoir, a ridiculous novelty song that told of a brain transplant gone bad, where Cash gained the brain of a bank robber and his own ailing brain was put inside a chicken, who went on to performing success as the “Johnny Chicken Show.” Somehow Cash got Columbia to sanction the idea, though it was a kind of large middle finger raised at their less-than-fervent interest in his present career. “I was burlesquing myself,” Cash recalled, “and forcing CBS to go along with it; I even made them pay

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<sup>101</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 183

<sup>102</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 197

for a video, shot in New York, with me dressed like a chicken.”<sup>103</sup> Thirteen years earlier his “Man in Black” character had marked a skillful engagement of past religious tradition and contemporary culture; now “Chicken in Black”’s egregious self-parody suggested artistic bankruptcy and extreme cultural disengagement.

“The Chicken in Black” single, unsurprisingly, did not place in the Country charts, and nor did the 1985 album *Rainbow*. In 1986 Columbia decided not to renew Cash’s contract. That same year, on the heels of his father Ray’s death and a vision in a dream on Christmas night 1985, Cash finished his novel about the apostle Paul and published it through Harper and Row. Like “Chicken in Black,” its title *Man in White* played on the persona Cash had created in 1971, but sought to reclaim that persona from self-destructive burlesque. The novel’s Man in White is the risen Christ, who appeared to Paul, fervent opponent of the early Christian movement, in a blinding vision on the road to Damascus. A song that Cash wrote and published as the novel’s epigraph expressed his own sense of this event that formed the novel’s centerpiece: “then the Man in White/ appeared to me/ in such a blinding light/ it struck me down/ and with its brilliance/ took away my sight/ then the Man in White/ in gentle loving tones spoke to me/ and I was blinded so that I might see/ the Man in White.”<sup>104</sup> This was precisely the spirit of the rural Protestant testimony form, where the idealized initiate was caught unawares by a divine action, where a feeling of deep human insufficiency was the *via negativa* pointing to God. Both song and novel presented a continued engagement with the Man in Black character, and here the theological sense of that persona was much more explicit: the Man in Black was an embodiment

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<sup>103</sup> Cash with Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 340. Cash’s memory was faulty: in the video he was dressed as a superhero figure, with a long blue cape, and the video was filmed in Nashville. In a 1988 interview with Bill Flanagan, Cash said that the song was not his idea, but that he let producer Billy Sherrill talk him into recording it. Flanagan, “Johnny Cash, American” *Musician* May 1988

<sup>104</sup> Johnny Cash, *Man in White* frontispiece

of negative theology, revealing limit and portraying those on the margins, thereby suggesting a *via negativa* to a mysterious Man in White.

*Man in White* created much less of a stir than *Gospel Road*, and Cash was annoyed to find reviews like novelist Barry Hannah's. Hannah was favorable to the novel, judging it "a highly literary effort," but he also opined that "off the top I'd guess Cash didn't write it at all."<sup>105</sup> But the novel's juxtaposition with the Man in Black persona, its narrative version of negative theology, and even some of its exact images and phrases stayed with Cash and informed his remarkable composition "The Man Comes Around" in the twilight of his life. Unlike *Man in White* or *The Gospel Road*, "The Man Comes Around" gained massive visibility: it was the opening song and title track on the 2002 double album that became Cash's first platinum since *At San Quentin* and his highest-charting Country album in twenty-six years.<sup>106</sup>

As the previous chapter discussed, Cash's association with producer Rick Rubin, beginning in 1993 and continuing until his death in 2003, renewed his artistic spirit and generated excitement about his present music, even as his health began a sharp decline. In 1997 he was forced to stop forty-two years of incessant touring because of mounting infirmities: asthma, diabetes, a broken jaw that had never healed and kept him in constant pain, a bout with pneumonia that put him in a ten day coma, and the onset of autonomic neuropathy, a debilitating disease in which a person loses control of involuntary nervous functions like perspiration and digestion.<sup>107</sup> "It was a difficult time for Johnny," Rick Rubin recalled. "His whole life really changed, because he was someone who had done around 300 shows a year for the past 40 years. I think that stopping touring, more than anything else, was a lot for him to come to terms

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<sup>105</sup> On *Man in White*'s reception, see Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 247; for Cash's annoyance at Hannah's review, see Nick Tosches, "Chordless in Gaza: The Second Coming of John R. Cash" *Journal of Country Music* 28

<sup>106</sup> [www.riaa.com](http://www.riaa.com)

<sup>107</sup> Turner, *Man Called Cash* 203-208; Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 264-269



with.”<sup>108</sup> Marshall Grant, with whom Cash reconciled in the late 90s after a falling-out in 1980, noted in his memoir that “it was tough to look at John in the condition he was in.” By 1998, “he could hardly walk, his eyesight was failing, and his body was deteriorating fast. His mind, however, remained sharp as a tack.”<sup>109</sup> Son John Carter recalled that his father was “steadily growing weaker, so it was surprising and inspiring that, despite his infirmity, he was unceasingly productive creatively.”<sup>110</sup>

Cash poured that creativity into heavy recording in the years 2000-2003, and especially into one song. “I wrote and recorded ‘The Man Comes Around’ early on in this project,” Cash wrote in the liner notes, “and for three or four months I recycled that song, over and over, until I’d have to get up out of bed, and turn on the radio. It worked for a while, but my inner playback system always went back to ‘The Man Comes Around.’ I spent more time on this song than any I ever wrote. It’s based, loosely, on the book of Revelation, with a couple of lines, or a chorus, from other biblical sources. I must have written three dozen pages of lyrics, then painfully weeded it down to the song you have here.”<sup>111</sup> “I was trying for something special,” he told journalist Sylvie Simmons. “I probably have 40 or 50 verses that I wrote that I didn’t use.”<sup>112</sup> His original music for the song was fairly simple and sparse, maintaining a constant rhythm with three guitars and a bass. It sounded a lot like “I Walk the Line,” Cash’s first major hit (in 1956), and in fact the electric guitar on the early version was Luther Perkins’ own, here being played in Perkins’ distinct style by Marty Stuart.<sup>113</sup> Rubin pushed for a more uneven rhythm, alternating

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<sup>108</sup> Rick Rubin, liner notes to *Unearthed* (American Recordings 2003) booklet p24

<sup>109</sup> Grant with Zar, *I Was There* 340,343

<sup>110</sup> John Carter Cash, *Anchored in Love: An Intimate Portrait of June Carter Cash* 168. Peggy Knight, the Cashes’ personal caregiver, reveals that Cash and June Carter stayed in the hospital twenty different times in the years 2001-2003, and that Cash himself spent 125 days there. Knight, *My 33 Years Inside the House of Cash* (New York: Premium, 2004):211

<sup>111</sup> Johnny Cash, liner notes to *The Man Comes Around* (American Recordings, 2002)

<sup>112</sup> Johnny Cash, liner notes to *Unearthed* booklet p31

<sup>113</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 279

between staccato-like stanzas and a faster chorus with piano and keyboards on top of the weaving guitars.<sup>114</sup> His artistic instincts were acute: the changing rhythm and more elaborate choral backdrop fit the intensity of the lyrics' sense of drama. As a capstone furthering the mood, the song begins and ends with the scratchy, old-radio-sounding voice of Cash, reading a mystical vision from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Revelation.

Of the song's evocation and expression of Cash's religion, daughter Rosanne argued that the song marked "the culmination of a lifetime of that vision."<sup>115</sup> Critic Benjamin Hedin, in a retrospective piece after Cash's death, claimed that it was "arguably his greatest original song."<sup>116</sup> Biographer Michael Streissguth, often sharply critical of Cash's work with Rubin, wrote that the song was "probably the most riveting religious composition from Cash's pen."<sup>117</sup> Indeed, the song brought together a host of themes in a succinct and richly artistic way. It dramatized a sense of basic human limit and an elusive realm of unfathomable mystery. Like the neglected *Man in White*, it played on Cash's Man in Black persona to point to a heavenly Man, the resurrected Jesus, and in this it became Cash's own *memento mori*. And in context the song was a provocative countercultural document, one that used not the social ferment of the era, but rather Cash's own fading life, to send a message that was distinctly at odds with the mainstream.

The song opens with Cash reading the prophet John's first person narrative of the vision of the seven seals: "And I heard, as it were, the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, 'Come and see,' and I saw. And behold—a white horse." If the Man in Black image had played on the figure of the old rural preacher implicitly, here the connection was explicit. Cash narrated as if he were the prophet John, and like the rural preachers with their framing devices (chapter

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<sup>114</sup> Rubin, liner notes to *Unearthed* booklet 80

<sup>115</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 278

<sup>116</sup> Benjamin Hedin, "JC's Resurrection" *The Nation* 36

<sup>117</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 278

7), his “I heard” and “I saw” erased the line between past and present and put the hearer imaginatively into the biblical scene. The song then began with Cash signing a signal line from the *memento mori* song “Man Goin’ Round:” “there’s a man goin’ round takin names” (chapter 6). In that song the Man was Death, an awful visitor that slowly made the rounds and claimed the names of all those close to the narrator, mother, father, sister, brother, until the narrator was left in terrifying solitude. This Man, however, was not Death but the risen Christ, awe-inspiring conqueror of death: “there’ll be a golden ladder reaching down/ when the Man comes around/ the hairs on your arm will stand up/ from the terror in each sip and in each sup.” The sound swelled in the chorus as Cash sang of a mystical catastrophe:

Hear the trumpets hear the pipers  
One hundred million angels singing  
Multitudes are marching to the big kettle drum  
Voices callin’, voices cryin’  
Some a-born and some a-dyin’  
It’s Alpha and Omega’s kingdom come  
And the whirlwind is in the thorn tree  
The virgins are all trimming their wicks  
The whirlwind is in the thorn tree  
It’s hard for thee to kick against the pricks<sup>118</sup>

Cash freely ranged across the Bible—the whirlwind image of God from the book of Job, virgins trimming wicks from a parable in the book of Matthew, kicking against the pricks from Paul’s vision of Jesus in the book of Acts (also the centerpiece of *Man in White*)—to create a sense of surreal majesty, punctuating his portrait with direct calls to the audience, “will you partake of that last offered cup?” and “listen to the words long written down,” like a preacher’s sermonic invitation. The language was that of the King James Bible, *the Bible* of the old rural South. The image of the thorn tree evoked the crown of thorns that Jesus wore when crucified (and that Cash

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<sup>118</sup> Johnny Cash, “The Man Comes Around” *The Man Comes Around* (American Recordings, 2002)

also sang of in “Hurt”), as well as Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” which Cash had described through a story of his own creation in *Man in White*.<sup>119</sup>

Like the *Man in Black* with his dramatization of limit, here there would never be complete peace and healing in this life:

‘Til Armageddon no shalom, no Siloam  
Then the father hen will call his chickens home  
The wise men will bow down before the throne  
And at his feet they’ll cast their golden crowns  
When the Man comes around

But until that consummating moment, before the Man displaced Death, it was the power over human life. As the song came to a close, Cash’s spoken-word narration from Revelation appeared again. “And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts, and I looked, and behold—a pale horse, and its name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.”

One did not need to know the old folk “Man Goin’ Round” or Cash’s *Man in White* novel to understand the principal context for the song—Cash’s own approaching death. Various media from 1997 on publicized his deteriorating condition. In the summer of 2002 the *Journal of Country Music* ran a major feature on Cash by Patrick Carr, the journalist who had worked with Cash on his 1997 memoir. Carr opened by writing, “in the spring of this year there were only two items of pressing concern to Johnny Cash fans: his health, and our prospects for more of his music.”<sup>120</sup> In October Cash was well enough to appear for an interview on Larry King’s talk show (aired in November, a few weeks after *The Man Comes Around* album was released). The interview was poignant, showing a 70 year old Cash who looked like he was about 95, and Cash talked candidly about his decline. “Are you bitter?” King asked. Cash, surprised, said, “Bitter? No.” King pushed the point. “Angry? You’re a young guy. You’re only 70,” and Cash said, “No,

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<sup>119</sup> Cash, *Man in White* 150

<sup>120</sup> Carr, “Johnny Cash: The Sprit is Willing” *Journal of Country Music* 18

I'm not bitter. Why should I be bitter? I'm thrilled to death with life. Life is—the way God has given it to me was—just a platter, a golden platter of life laid out there for me. It's been beautiful.”<sup>121</sup>

“The Man Comes Around” was thus Cash’s own *memento mori*, a starkly candid evocation of the limit of human life. But, like the *memento mori* tradition of rural Protestantism, it was not fatalistic or in a spirit of despair. As the limit of human life and the great unknown, death was the revelator of God’s mysteries. Cash dramatized this sensibility in his song by singing not about his own mortality directly, but rather by displacing himself and singing instead of a mystical Man, Christ the conqueror of death. The spoken-word framing devices from the book of Revelation accentuated this displacement: Cash was simply a witness of a mystery, a strange scene evoked in rich imagery.

In the years 68-71 Cash had found creative ways to bring basic themes in rural Protestantism into engagement with the ferment of the counterculture. In 2002 his *The Man Comes Around* album that struck such a chord was, in its own way, deeply countercultural. In 1963 Jessica Mitford coined the phrase “American Way of Death” to characterize the funeral industry’s management of death, emblematic of a larger cultural longing for the “denial of death.” (see chapter 7) The youth culture that emerged in the post-World War II years and has blossomed since the 1960s has its own widespread practices for denying death—particularly through rendering the elderly invisible or as recrudescing childlike figures, and romanticizing the deaths of wild young rebels. Cash’s “Man Comes Around,” the press he gave promoting it, and Mark Romanek’s candid “Hurt” video, put death and personal deterioration before the public through Cash’s visibility and the utter absence of romanticizing. Rick Rubin recalled a comment that Bono, U2’s lead singer and lyricist, made to him after seeing an advance showing of the

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<sup>121</sup> Larry King Live November 26, 2002. The interview was filmed on October 11. Turner, *Man Called Cash* 263

“Hurt” video, but it can be extended to capture the spirit of Cash’s engagement with death in “The Man Comes Around.” Bono told Rubin, “when Elvis made records, it was so shocking and radical and important because the culture was adult, and Elvis came along with young people’s music. Now we live in a youth culture, and here’s Johnny Cash doing very grown-up, adult material, even about getting old, which is equally as shocking as the beginning of Elvis’ career. It’s the other side of the coin.”<sup>122</sup>

The comparison of the two figures is apt. Born in the 1930s South, Cash in Arkansas and Presley in Mississippi, both became major figures in American pop culture. But Elvis, as Bill Malone wrote, was himself “a child of popular culture...the movies, hot-rod culture, all forms of popular music...and, ultimately, television.”<sup>123</sup> His music and image indirectly celebrated the transformed South of the post-World War II years, the consumer world of the Sunbelt, and as Malone notes, “until the very end of his life, Elvis’ songs held out the possibilities of personal liberation and joyful fulfillment.”<sup>124</sup> Personally, beneath the King persona, Presley preserved few traces of his impoverished past. “He hated antiques...They reminded him of being poor,” Charles Wilson notes.<sup>125</sup> Nor, as an adult, did he stay with the Assembly of God faith in which he had been raised; by the time of his death he was reading books marked by a vague spiritualism.

Cash, by contrast, lived around traces of his rural past: his home on Old Hickory Lake was built out of wood scavenged from old farm buildings in Tennessee and Kentucky, in California in the 60s he planted cotton in his yard (and his father Ray continued the practice in front of the House of Cash in the 70s), and late in life he was working on a novel with a long

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<sup>122</sup> Martin Alston, “Cash’s Video Adieu” *Mojo* May 2003 [accessible [www.markromanek.com](http://www.markromanek.com)]

<sup>123</sup> Bill Malone, “The Rural South Moves to the City: Country Music Since World War II” in Hurt, ed. *The Rural South Since World War II* 105

<sup>124</sup> Malone, “Rural South” 106

<sup>125</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “The Iconography of Elvis” in Wilson, *Judgment and Grace* 133

backward glance, *The Hoxie Rock*, about the formative year of 1944 in his youth.<sup>126</sup> His image and music, unlike Presley's, was heavily indebted to the rural world of his youth. And Cash belonged as both a boy and an old man to the Baptist church (after Assembly of God experimentation in the 70s). Most importantly for this project, the vision that Cash expressed in his late, much-labored song "The Man Comes Around," breathed the spirit of the religion that made a mark on him in that vanished rural South. It was his own *memento mori* evocation of limit and mystery (chapter 6), it demonstrated a skillful engagement of biblical story and present reality, through participatory, narrative means (chapter 7), and it used death as a *via negativa* pointing to a liminal figure, the mysterious Man (chapter 5).

This musical repudiation of the American Way of Death brought the ethos of rural Protestantism into a context far removed from its origin. It also clearly spoke to a minority impulse in the culture: buyers made *The Man Comes Around* a gold album six months after its release, and sales skyrocketed in the week after Cash's death to make it platinum.<sup>127</sup> But it was not Cash's final music. Even as *Man Comes Around* made its way to listeners, Cash was hard at work on another album. Devastated by the loss of June Carter in May 2003, he pushed on with fervent recording as a way to fight being consumed by sorrow. He also made a difficult, wheelchair-bound appearance at the Carter Family Fold in Poor Valley, Virginia on June 21, 2003, playing at the small, rustic concert hall as a way to honor both June and the Carter Family, who had emerged from the Valley in 1927 to help create the genre of country music. The music that Cash recorded in these hard, fading final months only reached the public some three years after his death on September 12, 2003. Released on July 4, 2006 as *A Hundred Highways*, the

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<sup>126</sup> Christopher Wren, *Winners Got Scars Too* 134 on the cotton patch in California; Peggy Knight, *My 33 Years Inside the House of Cash* 63 on Ray's cotton in front of the House of Cash; Johnny Cash, *Man in Black* 86-87 on his home (he lived there from 1967 to 2003); Nick Tosches, "Chordless in Gaza" 29 on the novel

<sup>127</sup> See Recording Industry Association of America statistics on [www.riaa.com](http://www.riaa.com)

album immediately soared to #1 on both Country and Pop charts, a feat matched only by 1969's *At San Quentin*.<sup>128</sup>

As on *The Man Comes Around*, mortality is the shadow over *A Hundred Highways*, and it is a kind of coda to the intensity of the previous album. Cash's version of the old folk gospel song "God's Gonna Cut You Down" (also known as "Run on For a Long Time") depicted the awe of a God who both gave life and took it away. Here, as on "The Man Comes Around," Cash wove himself into the song as a witness of God's mysterious actions. "Well my goodness gracious let me tell you the news/ my head's been wet with the midnight dew/ I been down on bended knee/ talking to the Man from Galilee/ he spoke to me in a voice so sweet/ I thought I heard the shuffle of angels' feet/ he called my name and my heart stood still/ when he said, 'John go do my will.'" But the general tone of the songs was one of peaceful rumination and an acceptance of human life as gift, evident on his masterful covers of Bruce Springsteen's "Further On Up the Road," Rod McKuen's "Love's Been Good to Me," and Ian Tyson's "Four Strong Winds."

*A Hundred Highways* contained the last song Cash ever wrote, "Like the 309," a gospel song with train imagery that reached far back to "Folsom Prison Blues." That early 50s composition, as noted, evoked the confinements of class and the unfairness of poverty, experiences that a young J.R. Cash had only recently escaped through the Air Force. "Like the 309" told of a different confinement, but its mood was not "Folsom"'s doleful sadness but rather a strange contentment, based on a different train with an odd freight:

Take me to the depot, put me to bed  
Blow an electric fan on my gnarly old head  
Everybody take a look see I'm doing fine  
Then load my box on the 309

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<sup>128</sup> Ben Sisario, "After 37 Years, a No. 1 for Johnny Cash" *New York Times* July 13, 2006; Geoff Mayfield, "Cash's *Highways* Lead to No. 1 on Billboard 200" *Billboard* 118:29 (July 22, 2006)



On the 309, on the 309  
Put me in my box on the 309...  
A chicken in the pot, and turkey in the corn  
Ain't felt this good since Jubilee morn  
Talk about luck, well I got mine  
Asthma comin' down like a 309<sup>129</sup>

This was neither fatalistic nor sentimental, but rather precisely in its earthy, morbid preoccupation, expressed hope that a mystery train would haul one away into a brighter future.

In the wake of Cash's death, a number of commentators noted his Christian hopefulness that death was not the final word, but in doing so many missed the dialectical tone of his vision. Richard Corliss' assessment in *Time*, which honored Cash with the cover story, was emblematic. In place of mourning, Corliss argued, people "could segue into celebration over a difficult life made exemplary, an outlaw redeemed by a woman's devotion. Besides, if you believe, the Man in Black is now garbed in white, and the doting husband has eternity to spend with his beloved."<sup>130</sup> Corliss quoted contemporary country singer Faith Hill, who said that Cash was "the only man in black who can walk straight through the Pearly Gates," and he noted that Shelby Lynne, another younger country musician, had composed a song on the day of Cash's death called "Today's the Day When Johnny Met June," about their reuniting in heaven.<sup>131</sup>

The previous chapter took issue with the "outlaw redeemed by a woman's devotion" narrative, arguing that Cash himself presented a different, less triumphal and less gendered narrative. Here it is worth pointing out that the notion of death as but an easy step on the way to blissful eternity—an eternity where real completeness meant being reunited with one's romantic partner—was not Cash's. Certainly Cash was devastated by the loss of his wife, and his children have said that their father, ordinarily concealing his pain even from them, wept without comfort

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<sup>129</sup> Johnny Cash, "Like the 309" *A Hundred Highways* (American Recordings, 2006)

<sup>130</sup> Richard Corliss, "The Man in Black" *Time* 162:12 (September 22, 2003)

<sup>131</sup> Corliss, "Man in Black"

in the months after June's death.<sup>132</sup> And on a song like the old "Wayfaring Stranger," which he and John Carter adapted and arranged as the closing number on the 2000 album *Solitary Man*, Cash sang a vision of life after death in which God's new world involved not just the end of sickness, toil, and danger, but also no more separation from loved ones. But, in "Wayfaring Stranger," as in the various musical expressions over Cash's career—"Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?," "Greystone Chapel," "Look for Me," "Man in Black," "Redemption," "The Beast in Me," "Hurt," "The Man Comes Around," "Like the 309"—that vision of hope was always marked by a candid awareness of the darker side of life. Death as Cash sang about it on "The Man Comes Around," "God's Gonna Cut You Down," and "Like the 309" was occasion for both terror and hope, and the principal confrontation in death was not easy reunion with one's spouse, but with "the Man," who, Cash sang in "The Man Comes Around," "decides who to free and who to blame/ everybody won't be treated all the same."

This morning—September 12, 2007, exactly four years since Cash's death—the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* ran a large-print headline in commemoration for the thousands who died on September 11, 2001. "We ask God," it said, "to hug them for us."<sup>133</sup> At a memorial ceremony in New York, Rudolph Giuliani closed his speech with a phrase that has become omnipresent since 2001: "God bless America." The vague god evoked in this phrase, the benign post-mortem vision of embracing, are widespread in the present and float independently of any particular religious tradition. The headline of the paper in Atlanta, that emblematic New South city that also became a pillar of the Sunbelt, arguably reflects no regionally distinct religious sensibility. Nor, for that matter, do the comments of Hill (who grew up in Mississippi in the 70s and 80s) or Lynne (who

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<sup>132</sup> Streissguth, *Johnny Cash* 283-284

<sup>133</sup> *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* September 12, 2007. The phrase is General Peter Pace's.

grew up in Alabama in the same years), both figures in the post-1990 world of country music, one of mass national audiences and unprecedented amounts of money.

Though he became a major figure in American popular culture, gained considerable wealth, and himself aided in country music's push for a wider audience, Cash came from a very different world, from a pre-Sunbelt New South, from a family that belonged to a poor landless class, from a rich oral culture into whose patterns mainstream popular culture was only beginning to percolate, in an era when country music was still marginalized as "hillbilly," and in a culture where a powerful people's religious culture was neither vague nor benign, but rather rooted in specific ideas and practices and deeply intertwined with the hard lives of the rural poor. Part of Cash's creativity was that he found ways to articulate that religious culture's sensibility both to himself and to listening audiences far removed from the world that nursed that culture. As the two periods of his mass popularity (1968-1971, 2002-2006) suggest, listeners wanted Cash to be a somewhat foreign voice, partly in the past and partly in the present—perhaps what Kris Kristofferson invoked when he wrote in tribute (chapter 1) that Cash was like "a biblical character...like some old preacher, one of those dangerous old wild ones."<sup>134</sup> Certainly normative, mainstream narration of what Cash was about, like *Time*'s, will circulate in the culture, but it was Cash's skillful contemporizing of themes in a particularistic, regional religious sensibility that will account for at least part of his appeal. The real foreignness of the past—in this case a religious vision that we may not be able to generate from our own context—may be precisely what many seek when, as consumers, they purchase Cash records in the highly commercialized realm of popular music.

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<sup>134</sup> Kris Kristofferson, "Johnny Cash" *Rolling Stone* 946 (April 15, 2004):116

## CHAPTER 10

### GHOSTS AND THE CULTURAL PASSAGE

In some ways it was a quiet drama: beginning in the mid-30s with the revolutionary Agricultural Adjustment Act, cresting in the 40s and especially the 50s when some three million left the South altogether, rural people of both races left the countryside for good, and their children have not returned to the farm. Cash was one of these millions. His parents were sharecroppers who struggled for and achieved small landownership, only to find, by the late 40s, that smallholdings of 20 or 40 acres could not compete with large-scale, capital-intensive neoplantations. Cash found a way out of the cotton patch in the US military, and his 1954 return to settle in bustling Memphis was emblematic of what many rural migrants were finding: a quantitatively better standard of living in the emergent industrial, urban/suburban Sunbelt. That he was subsequently able to make a living not as an appliance salesman but rather as a musical performer was due not just to his creativity and ambition, but also to the new, widespread purchasing power of millions of people in the post-World War II “consumer’s republic”—a radical change from the early 40s when families like the Cashes bought very little, and at one point were forced to sell Carrie’s beloved, battered guitar because it was a dispensable luxury.

It’s easy to narrate this story of rural diaspora as a unilateral gain. Jack Temple Kirby, one of the leading historians of this mid-century transformation, argues that “some migrants and commuters mourned the loss of local relations and the homier life of the semisubsistence community, but most (especially black folk) were happy to be free of the oppression of the old

system. No romantics were they.”<sup>1</sup> Oral memories of a distinct sample of whites and blacks, elderly people who grew up in rural poverty in the rich cotton lands of the Brazos River valley in central Texas, suggest that rural people experienced the transformations in their lives with much greater ambivalence. They were not romantics, but they were not celebrants of consumer capitalist triumph either. William Ellis, a part-time white preacher who struggled to sustain a small rural church whose members in 2000 were elderly ex-tenants and sharecroppers, reflected: “The part about the country church that was so good was the fact that people were so poor, so poor. The church was the only place they had to go...These people were the folks that couldn’t ride to Leroy [nearby town] because they couldn’t pay the price. Now, they park their Mercedes and their Lexus and the Cadillacs and the Lincolns. Lexus, Cadillac, Lincoln, see them right there?...And they’d walk to church. Mud! Times have changed.”<sup>2</sup> Wanda Duty, from a family of white small farmers, remembered the central place of the rural church. “Well, I think, more or less, our lives were built around—our lives were built more or less around the church.” She then struggled to convey her sense that something was missing in the present. She recollected that in the rural churches “everybody come to worship, not to come to be seen. And I think that’s—the town churches are more the other way sometimes...I feel like the town churches sometimes—people like we were out at Liberty Hill, you know, we went to worship—you go to worship now, but you still have to deal with other things, too.”<sup>3</sup>

Barbara Williams, from a black sharecropping family, also struggled to express this sense of loss. “How would you describe some of the basic changes between today and the past in the church?,” she was asked. Williams said, “I don’t know how I would say it, but church today—maybe it’s me—it’s not like it used to be. We don’t have enough love for God and then our

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* 154

<sup>2</sup> William Ellis interview January 27, 2000 Baylor University Institute for Oral History

<sup>3</sup> Wanda Duty interview August 11, 1998 Baylor IOH

fellow man.”<sup>4</sup> Ernestine Anderson, whose family struggled as black tenants to purchase 22 acres of poor soil (see chapter 3), contrasted contemporary revivals with those of the past. “It’s just not what I remember them to be. And maybe it’s me, I don’t know. It’s just the atmosphere is different. It’s like a good old worship, and that’s fine, but a revival was a special thing...It was a spirit-filled time. And we used to be at revivals at eleven, twelve o’clock at night.”<sup>5</sup> Roosevelt Fields, who grew up in the rural black community of Downsville, remembers, “I come up under the old-timey religion. I come up under the mourners bench...the old folks didn’t have—they didn’t get no education, but they knew the Lord...I thank God for the old-timey religion and I believe in time to come, I believe we will go back to it.” Field then recounted the church’s move away from the tradition of the mourners bench, and suggested that prosperity had a price. The interviewer asked, “So, prosperity in a sense—” and Fields interrupted: “Hurt. Yes, it does...not only the church, but it affected families and communities, you know—in our community, where we grew up, no one went hungry. If we killed hogs, everybody got some parts of it.”<sup>6</sup> Carl Neal, from a white sharecropping family, said pointedly that “everything was at a much lower level as far as economics is concerned. And I’m not sure if that’s not what this country needs. I sure don’t want to see it, but—because we lose our priorities.” Old rural life “was harder,” Neal recalled, “but it was kinder in a lot of ways, too.”<sup>7</sup>

In his 1997 memoir, Cash offered his own ambiguous backward glance. “Inside me, my boyhood feels so close, but when I look around, it sometimes seems to belong to a vanished world. In the United States in the late 1990s, is it really possible to imagine whole families, boys and girls of eight to eighteen at their parents’ sides in the cotton fields, working through the July

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Williams interview April 21, 1998 Baylor IOH

<sup>5</sup> Ernestine Anderson interviewed February 17, 1999 Baylor IOH

<sup>6</sup> Roosevelt Fields interviewed May 14, 1999 Baylor IOH

<sup>7</sup> Carl Neal interviewed February 11, 1993 Baylor IOH

heat from dawn to dusk, driving away exhaustion with songs of the spirit?”<sup>8</sup> Later he reminisced: “I’m remembering my childhood again. I’m back on the front porch of that government house in Dyess Colony, with my mom and dad and brothers and sisters, all of us together, while my mother sings her sacred songs and plays her guitar, banishing fear and loneliness, bringing the black dog to heel, drowning out even the screams of panthers from the brush. Those are sounds I’ll never hear again, neither the panthers nor my mother’s comforting voice. I still have the songs, though.”<sup>9</sup>

That same memoir pulled no punches in describing family labor on the day after Jack’s death, and the ways in which poverty pushed down on Ray Cash and took a toll on the family, one that left enduring marks on Cash as an adult (see chapter 3). That someone would be happy to be delivered from the bad “good old days” can become too self-evident, though. Cash himself and the elderly people in McClennan County, Texas narrate their own experience of the mid-century transformation with mixed feelings. They do this, this project has argued, because there was a religious good that possessed considerable meaning for them. Participation in the postwar consumer’s republic meant freedom from the poverty and toil of the cotton patch, but also the possibility of the loss of the local communities, churches, and close-knit families that had taught and sustained a certain vision of faith. Tracing the exact scope of this religion among the rural poor of the New South is not possible, but I have tried to show that it was widespread and mattered to a lot of people. Certainly it deserves more space than Kirby gives it in *Rural Worlds Lost*, where mules and their famous flatulence get nine pages, religion and the churches three.<sup>10</sup>

In a poignant scene in Wayne Schowalter’s 1983 documentary *Harry Crews: Blood and Words*, Crews points at the camera and insists, “My books—tell you straight—my books are

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<sup>8</sup> Johnny Cash with Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* 16

<sup>9</sup> Cash with Carr 58-59

<sup>10</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost* 195-204 on mules, 182-184 on churches

about the nature of belief, my books are about the nature of faith, my books are about the search for belief. What does the believer do when there is nothing left to believe? Unless you're blind, deaf, and dumb—you look around you—unless you're blind, deaf, and dumb you know that that's what's happened. Everything has crumbled. Everything is dying around us.”<sup>11</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson argues that the mid-century transformations of rural life involved serious culture shock. “Poor southerners experienced the regional cultural passage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with special fury—uprooting rural lives, pushing them off the land, but bringing new opportunities with new ways.” But, Wilson argues, “religion helped mediate that transition.”<sup>12</sup> As if to echo Wilson, biographer Michael Streissguth argues that “Cash’s faith was a rock during the bad times.”<sup>13</sup>

Cash experienced the regional cultural passage in exaggerated and accelerated form: by 1956 he had acquired a wealth and fame that were unimaginable but two years earlier, when he first poked his head in the door at Sun Records. Did his inherited religion help mediate that transition? Did it help him cope with the shock of success? His early gospel composition “Belshazzar” indicates that even in the Air Force, when he was still an ex-farm boy and not yet “Johnny Cash,” he struggled to hold to a religious ideal at odds with the wide consumptive options of the postwar era. Drawing on the book of Daniel, the song told of a sumptuous, celebratory feast that met with rude, sudden interruption: “well the Bible tells us about a man/ who ruled Babylon and all its land/ around the city he built a wall/ and declared that Babylon would never fall/ he had concubines and wives/ he called his Babylon paradise/ on his throne he ate and drank/ but for Belshazzar it was getting late/ for he was weighed in the balance and found

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<sup>11</sup> *Harry Crews: Blood and Words*, dir. Wayne Schowalter (Roland Collection, 1983)

<sup>12</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “Popular Religion and the Southern Cultural Passage” in Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie* 178

<sup>13</sup> Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash: The Biography* 247



wanting/ his kingdom was divided it couldn't stand/ he was weighed in the balance and found wanting/ his houses were built upon the sand.”<sup>14</sup> Possibly the young composer was influenced directly by Hank Williams, whose records he bought in Germany.<sup>15</sup> Another ex-country boy who experienced cultural shock in exaggerated form, Williams composed songs with warnings like “Wealth Won't Save Your Soul” and “When God Comes and Gathers His Jewels.”<sup>16</sup> But Cash did not need to have Williams' direct influence. Both he and Williams had come from a rural culture that asked, in the words of a song that was a favorite of the Cash family, “What Would You Give in Exchange for Your Soul?”<sup>17</sup>

Throughout his adult life Cash struggled with this religious vision. He struggled because he also had a clear, ambitious, and lifelong drive for success as the mainstream culture of consumption imagined it. He pursued strictly religious projects—the gospel albums (1959, 1962, 1968, 1973, 1975, 1979, 1986, 2003), *The Gospel Road*, *Man in White*—though they were clearly not lucrative endeavors. The spirit driving these projects was more than just a nostalgic nod to tradition. Cash sought to infuse older songs like “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” and “Peace in the Valley” with contemporary meanings, and his own creations like the Man in Black persona and “The Man Comes Around” brought themes from rural Protestantism into engagement with concerns of the present. Doing this did not easily facilitate embrace of one's wealth and fame. The Man in Black persona reminded Cash's listeners (and perhaps Cash himself) of those who were not benefiting from present society, and the sense of

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<sup>14</sup> Johnny Cash, “Belshazzar” *God* (Columbia/Legacy, 2000 [1957])

<sup>15</sup> See Cash's letters in Vivian Cash with Ann Sharpsteen, *I Walked the Line: My Life With Johnny*

<sup>16</sup> Williams recorded these in the late 40s. Bill Malone argues that “Hank Williams could never escape the fatalistic vision of his rural forebears or his own sense of personal foreboding” and that “neither Williams nor his music can be understood apart from the religious context in which he was born and raised.” Malone, “The Rural South Moves to the City: Country Music Since World War II” in Hurt, ed. *The Rural South Since World War II* 106 for first quote; *Don't Get Above Your Raisin: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* 104 for second quote

<sup>17</sup> Cash with Carr, *Cash* 70-71

death in “The Man Comes Around” was a starker, less comforting vision that departed from the American Way of Death.

Cash’s most personal appropriation of a theme in rural Protestantism, its sense of perpetual struggle between God and Satan, was the lens through which he came to narrate his own life, on the *American Recordings* album and in the “Hurt” video. Bill Malone notes that the “religious confessional” is something of a stock feature in country music, and writes that “it is tempting to interpret this kind of religious posturing as little more than an attempt to assert country music’s moral superiority.”<sup>18</sup> Cash’s own musical confessionals demonstrated anything but his own moral superiority, and instead of a story of triumph, they told of a constant dialectic. The appeal of the Neo-Evangelical message for Cash may have been, as chapter 8 suggested, that it preached that he could erase his past of destructiveness to self and others and start with a blank slate. One does not have to read too hard between the lines of statements he made in the early years of Neo-Evangelical fervor to see this longing. In a May 1973 *Country Music* magazine interview, Cash said, “Right now I’m not ashamed of a thing I did because when God forgave me, then I forgave myself, see. That’s one thing that people like me have to learn to do, that after you’ve straightened up and stopped all that, and you know God forgave you, then the big sin would be not to forgive yourself. So I’m not ashamed of all that rot that I did. I don’t like to think about it.”<sup>19</sup>

For a time Cash clearly wanted to believe in the possibility of complete liberation from his past, and he struggled to tell this story in his 1975 *Man in Black*. But as noted in chapter 1, even in that fervent attempt to narrate Neo-Evangelical triumph Cash couldn’t help but return

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<sup>18</sup> Bill Malone, “The Gospel Truth: Christianity and Country Music” in Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, *The Encyclopedia of Country Music* 221

<sup>19</sup> Peter McCabe and Jack Killion, “Interview with Johnny Cash” *Country Music* May 1973 in Michael Streissguth, ed. *Ring of Fire: The Johnny Cash Reader* 132

and invoke something older, a world where “Jesus was our Savior—cotton was our King.” The sensibility absorbed in that world informed Cash’s creativity with a clear imprint after the Neo-Evangelical 70s. In *American Recordings* and “Hurt” he gave a confessional with a haunted overtone. “Ghosts can be fierce and instructive,” Flannery O’Connor argued in a 1960 lecture. “They cast strange shadows.”<sup>20</sup> In the musical art that he put before the public in a half-century career, we can see the ghosts of rural Protestantism that cast their strange shadows over the rich imagination of Johnny Cash.

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<sup>20</sup> Flannery O’Connor, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” in Sally Fitzgerald, ed. *Flannery O’Connor: Collected Works* 818

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