

RELIGION AND THE SOUTH 1865-1896

Charles C. HADLEY

Université Jean Moulin – Lyon 3

To begin with, let me say that I decided to call this paper “Religion and the South during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age”, and plan to give a very quick overview of the topic, with only one or two examples of specific religious organizations or people.

The organization of what follows is not entirely satisfactory, in that it perpetuates the racial segregation that Sydney Ahlstrom’s *Religious History of the American People* does: Black churches and white churches.

Another somewhat less than satisfactory feature is that I hardly address strictly religious questions at all: there is little in the way of theology, and a lot about the social and political effects and repercussions of religious movements and leaders’ actions. This is dictated partly, but only partly, by the terms of the “question de civilization” that is one of the objects of today’s work.

On a very institutional note, it will be observed that the only significant Supreme Court case having to do with religion during this period (at least according to the *Oxford Companion to the Supreme Court*¹) was *Reynolds v. United States*, 98 U.S. 145 (1878), in which the court held that religious duty was not a suitable defense to a criminal indictment, and that bigamy and polygamy could be prohibited by law without violating the establishment clause. It is thus outside the purview of the “question de civilization”.

To use an expression more commonly used to talk about interpretations of the law in the United States, it seems pretty clear from the instructions in the “Bulletin Officiel” that the “original intent” of the framers of the question for the agrégation is that it

¹ Hall, Kermit. *The Oxford Companion to the Supreme Court of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

should be read as “from the Second Inaugural to Plessy”; it is beyond doubt that those events were crucial in the unfolding drama of the aftermath of the Civil War, Reconstruction and the Gilded Age.

To understand religion after the Civil War, however, it is necessary to understand something of religion before the War, so I will lay some foundations before going on to the period the “question” calls upon us to treat.

Religion in the usual sense of the term has to do with collective, shared belief in and communication with another world, inhabited by at least one sentient, intelligent being that wields powers that can and do directly affect the material tangible everyday world. Perhaps more importantly for the present discussion, religion also often provides part of a foundation for identity by giving individuals an explanation, often in the form of a narrative, of their origins – the origins of humanity, as represented by, or incarnated in, the group of believers. Individuals derive a part of the what Martin Luther King, Jr called “somebodiness” (Letter from Birmingham Jail Apr 1963) from their sense of participation in a communion of people that share their beliefs about the other world (or indeed, in the case of atheists, that share their disbelief in another world) and how to communicate with it. Those very beliefs, furthermore, often consist in part not only of doctrines and dicta about the relation of the individual toward the other world and its inhabitant(s) but also about how to behave in this.

Religions also offer guidance about the present and the future, including the end-time and the end of the ordinary, material, tangible world and what will succeed it. Religion thus offers a sense of permanence that goes beyond the ordinary human life-span, including explanations of what believers may and should expect after death. Various of these features may or may not have political repercussions, i.e., choices societies make.

The being or beings of the other world are viewed with reverence and awe by the inhabitants of the everyday world, who try to adopt practices and beliefs that will allow or encourage favorable attitudes toward them on the part of the inhabitants of the other world. Since communication with that other world is by definition difficult and trying, religions usually call upon particular individuals to receive and interpret messages or information that come from beyond. These individuals, priests and pastors, assist the laity in understanding the dicta of prophets, seers, and oracles, not to mention sacred texts; their role often provides them with a forum from which to advise the public about other, more tangible, choice, i.e., political ones.

That religion — and the term should be taken here to mean what it meant to the vast majority of nineteenth century Americans, whether northerners or southerners, i.e., Protestant Christianity — was a pervasive feature of nineteenth century southern (not to mention American) life can hardly be emphasized enough; all of the century's great reform movements had religious underpinnings, and many of the most prominent public figures were clergymen or related to clergymen — one has only to think of the Beecher family for a prestigious example.

Before the Civil War, religion played a central role in the rising tensions of the period before that of the "Question de civilisation", when the abolitionism of such figures as William Garrison, Theodore Weld, Charles Finney or Henry Ward Beecher was founded on the bedrock of their Protestantism, and defenses of slavery often, too, looked to Biblical sources for their justifications. Quotations from the Bible were hurled with mighty force in every direction, and authors and speakers could assume that their readers and listeners would be able to recognize any and every Biblical quotation, as they, too, had been brought up reading the Bible, and probably used it as a primer in learning to read. Similarly, the individuals that wrote and spoke on one side or the other of this abyssal divide were members of churches, denominations and communions that themselves split on the rock of the slavery issue.

This said, it becomes clear on reading Sydney Ahlstrom's *History*, that religion played very different roles for blacks and for whites in the last third of the nineteenth century south.

For many Southern whites, religion and religious institutions justified and reinforced the racism that had become one of the cornerstones of pro-slavery ideology and that persisted so long into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, much as the churches had done, at least according to some scholars, before the Civil War. Furthermore, many scholars have found that religion provides useful tools for the analysis of others kinds of collectively held positions: the "Lost Cause" is one such, and the use of the term "Redeemers" another. This will be discussed more in detail below. A word will also be said below about Northern churches, almost by definition white at the time, but some of which, at least, did not, in the early Reconstruction period, share entirely, or sometimes even at all, in this orientation.

For blacks, religion represented simultaneously a refuge, through appeals to another world, from oppressive social and economic conditions, both before and after Emancipation, and at the same time,

especially after Emancipation, a base and starting point for political and social action in this world.

One of the striking features of the southern religious landscape in the nineteenth century both before and after the Civil War (and to a large extent today as well) is the near-monopoly of Baptism and Methodism, among both blacks and whites.

The two denominations do not appear at first to have much in common. Baptism is a very "Protestant" denomination, with each local congregation playing a very central role in the life of the believer and of the institution. There is very little emphasis on any ecclesiastical hierarchy: there are no bishops or other high-ranking prelates. The Baptist Conventions are essentially just that: a grouping of delegates from local congregations and churches that share beliefs and pool resources. Local congregations may or may not choose to be associated with one or another of the Conventions. Even those that do retain a great deal of local autonomy, and are at no-one's beck and call either in terms of ecclesiastical organization or, even more so, in terms of theological and doctrinal considerations. Even today, in the United States, there are several different Conventions that are principally white, and others that are largely black, some of the groupings along sectional lines that date to the dispute over slavery in the 1840s².

Methodism, which began as a breakaway from the Anglican Church, is as a consequence much more hierarchically structured, with bishops empowered to make decisions about regarding ecclesiastical issues in their dioceses. However, Methodism is a Protestant denomination, and as such, there are a number of families of Methodism, some of which have no bishops and are thus more distant from Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism.

During the antebellum period, the Methodist church, too, split over the issue of slavery: in the North, Methodism was not hostile to abolitionism; in the South, the church was one of the vehicles of secessionism and the defense of slavery.

The white Methodist church bodies reunited in the 1930s, but there are still African-American bodies that function entirely separately from the corresponding white institutions.

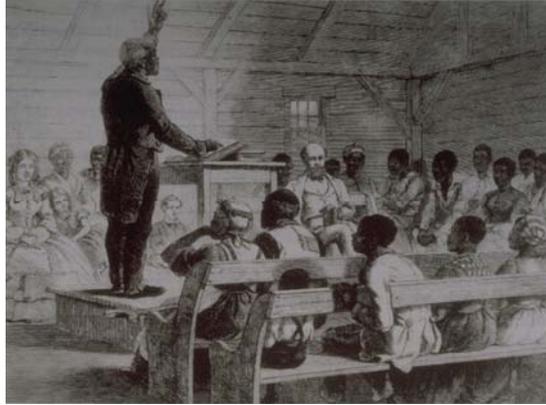
² Martin Luther King, Jr is credited with having said that Sunday morning is the most segregated day of the week – what was true of the 1960s was even more true of the 1880s and 90s.

For much of the nineteenth century, Methodism was the largest single Protestant denomination (and thus the largest denomination) in the South before the Civil War, and maintained that position of dominance till the beginning of the twentieth century. However, Baptism grew quickly after Appomattox, and at about the time of the end of the “question de civilization” surpassed Methodism in numbers of faithful. It may be that Methodism, with its more clearly defined hierarchical structure, was better suited to the conceptions of human relations that slavery was built upon; it is certain that Baptism grew after Emancipation in part because of growing numbers of African-American members.

A few other denominations, such as Episcopalianism and Presbyterianism, also played significant roles in southern political and social life despite their smaller numbers, at least in part because of the social rank of a number of practitioners of those communions.

Protestant Christianity was indeed deeply present before the war among the people most directly concerned by the slavery debate, but who were afforded the least voice: the slaves themselves. Before Emancipation, slaves in rural areas attended church services with their masters, in the back or in the gallery of the church, of course, but hearing the same sermons and exhortations to humility and obedience that their masters called for and heard. In urban districts, there were sometimes all-black churches, but they, too, were subject to the same surveillance and oversight by whites as their rural counterparts. This meant that the slaves had limited opportunities to express religious preferences apart from those chosen by their owners: the Slave Codes typically prohibited blacks from assembling, including for religious services, except under the supervision of a white person or people.

This did not necessarily prevent slaves from participating in religious life, as this illustration suggests:



Source: *The Illustrated London News* (Dec. 5, 1863), vol. 43, 561. (Copy in Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library)

A slave is preaching to a congregation of slaves and the plantation owner and his family. The preacher was a house slave who could read but not write. This illustration is from a “sketch made in a rude chapel erected for the slaves” on this cotton plantation, near Port Royal, South Carolina. “The Methodist persuasion is the one which finds most favour among the slaves in the Southern as well as among the free Negroes in the Northern States” [574].³ (The presence of white people in the congregation is significant both as a confirmation of the respect of the slave code, and also as an indication of the implicit respect for the black preacher’s ability to provide spiritual guidance not only to other slaves but also to their masters.)

To achieve a fuller and more satisfying personhood, a religious life independent of the masters’ was necessary. There thus grew up a kind of clandestine Protestant religious culture that is often called the “invisible institution”; it was to become a deeply entrenched part of the slaves’ clandestine answer to the dehumanizing status of slavery⁴: slaves would meet in secret, often at night, for religious services unsupervised by whites. The religious practices that evolved under these circumstances were a combination of Christian theology with remnants of African religious rituals. The Christianity of the slaves may have been limited in theological niceties, but it must be kept in

3

<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/details.php?categorynum=14&categoryName=Religion%20and%20Mortuary%20Practices&theRecord=25&recordCount=38>

⁴ “The so-called invisible institution took shape as the slaves combined their understanding of the Bible and their conceptions of life and the world with their suppressed yearnings for freedom from toil and bondage.” Ahlstrom 704 (It is probably unintentional on Ahlstrom’s part, but the invisible institution is barely visible in his own work: no references to it at all appear in the index!).

mind that their ancestral African religions had been nearly completely crushed out by the chaos of slavery, and that literacy was rare among the slaves (teaching slaves to read or write was prohibited by the slave codes), which meant that preachers had only their own understanding of scripture and their own rhetorical skills to found their sermons and addresses on. It is thus impressive that there should have been an independent religious life at all among the slaves, and all the more so as it evolved from a Christianity that had been deliberately deformed to promote and protect the interests of the Euro-American slave-owning class. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., Professor of Religion and African-American Studies, Princeton University, in his talk at the Pew Forum, quotes Howard Thurman: "The slaves dared to redeem a religion profaned in their midst."⁵

Again, the mere fact of the existence of a separate religious life, no matter how stunted, reveals a desire for selfhood and self-affirmation that can only be admired. The invisible institution played an important role in keeping alive a sense of independent human identity, free, be it only for a moment, from constant surveillance by whites. Furthermore, as I will try to develop later, it provided a proving ground and forum for the men who would become the political leaders and orators of the post-Emancipation period.

This said, the invisible institution and its successor institutions and denominations were perhaps also a source of vulnerability: the identity that came out of them was, after all, built of imported materials, foreign, in some sense, to the origins of the very people that molded them to their own needs. (Readers will note the paradox of "imported materials" being used by people who, in the Constitution of the United States itself, were obliquely referred to as "imported" Art I, Sec 9).

A source of group and individual identity, nevertheless, the invisible institution also offered a rare opportunity for talented individuals to stand out and be recognized among their peers as preachers and orators. As will be seen, it was thus these people (mostly men, of course) that were the best-equipped of their

⁵ Eddie Glaude Religion and Race: A Historical and Contemporary Perspective <http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=210>

Howard Thurman (1899 – April 10, 1981) was an influential American author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader. He was Dean of Theology and the chapels at Howard University and Boston University for more than two decades, wrote 20 books, and in 1944 helped found the first racially integrated, multicultural church in the United States [Wikipedia, consulted 10/12/2009].

communities to address the political issues that their new status as freedmen would create.

After Emancipation, most African-Americans quickly moved to establish their own religious institutions:

[w]ith the death of slavery, urban blacks seized control of their own churches, while the 'invisible institution' of the rural slave church emerged into the full light of day. The creation of an independent black religious life proved to be a momentous and irreversible consequence of emancipation.⁶

Eddie Glaude, at the Pew Forum event already referred to, commented that "African-American religious institutions become the site whereby the infrastructure of black communities begins to take shape, the germ of them".⁷ What he says about today was emphatically the case during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age:

Christianity answered to deeply felt needs of a people for whom emancipation had been a less than glorious boon. The churches were the chief means by which a structured or organized social life came into existence among the Southern freedmen.⁸

Black political and educational institutions very often grew out of religious origins, so a closer look at religious structures and organizations may be useful.

It is often observed that the structure of the Baptist denomination made the denomination appealing to African-Americans: the local institution is paramount, with membership in state, regional or national synods or organizations optional. There is thus no ecclesiastical hierarchy with authority to direct or command local congregations, which are, on the contrary, free to worship as their consciences and beliefs dictate. In the aftermath of the Emancipation Proclamation and Abolition, such autonomous religious institutions provided a welcome counterpart to the political liberation the federal measures promised. This probably accounts for statistics that report that about 40% of African-Americans today are members of Baptist congregations, far more than any other denomination. Furthermore, E S Gaustad reports in his *Historical Atlas*

⁶ Foner 1988, 88.

⁷ [Eddie Glaude at Pew Forum event in 2008 <http://pewforum.org/events/?EventID=210> Consulted 8/12/2009].

⁸ Ahlstrom, 709.

of *Religion in America* that by 1900, some 40% of Baptists were African-Americans, some two million strong.⁹

What was at first less clear in my mind is why so many African-Americans adopted Methodism, with its Episcopal hierarchical structure. Upon investigation, it would appear that this has roots in accidents of history: the first African-American church in the US was founded in the 1790s by two men that left a Methodist church when they were subjected to discrimination – and they more or less naturally founded a Methodist church; another related historical factor is the fact that before the Civil War, there were more black Methodists than Baptists, not because of choices made by the slaves, but because their owners were Methodists... Still another factor might be the opportunity for [a few] African-Americans to exercise a function as bishop that gives them hierarchical authority in a way that was generally denied them in society at large. Whatever the reasons for the statistics, Methodism unquestionably provided a sense of identity to its faithful: S Ahlstrom reports the reply of “a rural Alabama Negro who was asked to identify the people in the adjoining community: ‘The nationality in there is Methodist.’” (Ahlstrom, 710).

It bears repeating, I think, that Christianity, whether Methodist or Baptist, was neither the ancestral religion of the slaves, nor of the freedmen. On the contrary, under slavery, Christianity functioned as a means of social control, as a device for ripping away the cultural identity of the slaves and replacing it with a theologically impoverished religious culture that emphasized humility, obedience and “turning the other cheek” far more than the improbability of a rich man’s entering heaven. Like religious beliefs everywhere, this one contributed to the construction and development of a group identity. However, it created, in some sense, a conflicted identity: in the eyes of whites, after all, an African-American’s blackness was an insurmountable obstacle to achieving the status of a fully mature Christian, which was nevertheless held out as being the only conceivable goal. After Emancipation, there could be no question of returning to anything akin to fully realized ancestral African religions: virtually all that was left was the Protestant Christianity of the nineteenth century United States. The freedmen embraced it eagerly: Eric Foner reports (1988, 97) that an elderly freedman attending school with his granddaughter explained that he was there to learn to read the Bible:

⁹ Edwin Scott Gaustad. *Historical Atlas of Religion in America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

By the end of the Gilded Age, “[t]he little churches of the rural south were a psychological and social necessity — the more so because they institutionalized the only area in which a fair measure of Negro freedom remained.”¹⁰

The religious practices that the blacks adopted and adapted, first as part of the invisible institution, then as part of the “Black church”, included features of African religious rituals that Victorian American Protestants sometimes found it difficult to relate to. The “ring-shout”, “a ceremony with West African religious roots in which participants gathered and rotated in a circle as they sang, danced and clapped,”¹¹ is one well-known example.



This illustration gives a hint of how exotic the ring-shout must have seemed to white observers. Source: Charles Stearns, *The Black Man of the South* (New York, 1872), facing p. 371.

Just before they break up, when the ‘spirit is upon them’... they engage in a kind of shaker dance, which they term singularly enough, shouting... A ring of singers is formed in an open space in the room, and they, without holding on to each other’s hands, walk slowly around and around in a circle... They then utter a kind of melodious chant, which gradually increases in strength, and in noise, until it fairly shakes the house, and it can be heard for a long distance... I know of nothing similar to this dancing or shouting, in the religious exercises of any other class

¹⁰ Ahlstrom, 709.

¹¹ Blum, Edward J. *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898*. Conflicting worlds. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005, 62.

of people. It is entirely unknown among the white Christians here.¹²

Stearns's is a comparatively objective, unbiased report; it does not seem to have occurred to other observers that the ring-shout or similar ritual activities might be considered as proof of the ingenuity and will to survive of the slaves and the freedpeople that succeeded them rather than as an embarrassing failure to conform to the norms of polite society. It can, after all, quite legitimately be held that synthesizing elements of their lost African culture with the Christianity that was forced upon them by their surroundings to devise a new religious practice that permitted the creation of a group identity reveals a remarkable degree of inventiveness and creativity:

It 'seems to me certainly the remains of some old idol worship,' claimed Laura Towne after observing such an event on the Sea Islands of South Carolina. 'I never saw anything so savage. They call it a religious ceremony, but it seems more like a frolic to me.'¹³

Whatever the response of refined northern missionaries, teachers and so on, there can be no doubt that Black freedmen's religious expression, not to mention beliefs and doctrines, were (and still are) very different from the staid and measured rituals of most Victorian-era Northern Protestantism. The parallel that Black religion (especially the invisible institution) drew between death, i.e. leaving behind the trials and sorrows of this material world to cross into a radically different world of eternal bliss, and escape in this world from slavery or, later, racial discrimination and oppression, to a new world of freedom and permanent self-affirmation, is perhaps only the most striking example of a theological interpretation of Christianity that was particularly salient among Blacks. Gospel music and spirituals give thinly veiled allusion to these concepts; it was up to Black preachers to make them explicit.

As has been noted above, the preaching style in freedmen's churches was often very emotional, and "charismatic" – preachers were not trained theology-school graduates, but self-taught orators, whose speaking style captivated and convinced their congregations.

¹² Stearns, 371-372.

<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/details.php?categorynum=14&categoryName=Religion%20and%20Mortuary%20Practices&theRecord=36&recordCount=38>

¹³ Blum, Edward J. *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898*. Conflicting worlds. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005, 62.

Black churches soon became the locus of other community activities and actions, such as schools and political action. Doing so required both conviction and organizational skills. The men who had stood out as spiritual guides, and who by definition had already established a public voice and presence before Emancipation naturally continued in that role afterwards and expanded it. Preachers very frequently took on political roles, in addition to their religious ones: after 1867, according to Foner

The church, and indeed every other black institution, became politicized. Every AME [African Methodist Episcopal] preacher in Georgia was said to be actively engaged in Republican organizing, and political materials were read aloud at 'churches, societies, leagues, clubs, balls, picnics, and all other gatherings.'¹⁴

The preacher,

a member of the only profession open to a Negro, in charge of the Blacks' only free institution, ... was a very important man.¹⁵

As such, preachers became spokespersons for interests of the freedpeople—a large percentage of the Blacks elected to state and federal offices had had their first experience of public life and had acquired reputations that gave them potential political clout in preaching.

One aspect of the interaction between religion and politics can be seen in the Biblical language used to explain current events: Foner reports that

freedmen habitually referred to slavery as Paul's Time and Reconstruction as Isaiah's Time (referring perhaps to Paul's message of obedience and humility, and Isaiah's prophecy of cataclysmic change brought about by violence).¹⁶

In a comparable vein, Abraham Lincoln was likened to Moses in having glimpsed the promised land of freedom and abolition, but not being allowed to see the campaign brought to full fruition.

The preacher's role was not necessarily unambiguous, however, and not all preachers became politicians: again, many preachers were gifted speakers, but untrained themselves in theology or any other field, and they often shared the distrust of book-learning that often

¹⁴ Foner 1988, 282-83; internal quotation from archival material.

¹⁵ Ahlstrom, 711.

¹⁶ Foner 1988, 94.

characterizes the under-educated. Twentieth century African-American authors have been very critical of this stance: EF Frazier writes of

the influence of the Negro preacher whose authoritarian personality and anti-intellectualism has cast a shadow over the intellectual outlook of Negroes.¹⁷

Anti-intellectualism is hardly confined to African-Americans, but the circumstances peculiar to African-American religious leadership in the nineteenth century perhaps provided unusually fertile ground for mistrust of scholarly refinements and arcana, surely associated in the minds of many Blacks with the well-read slave-owner class from before the war.

This anti-intellectual heritage was only another name for endemic revivalism, which as it developed in the Negro church may have involved an evasion of reality; but the basic forms of religious experience and the content and style of rural preaching were very similar whether the church was "colored" or "white". Both groups lacked a social gospel, both came to terms with the status quo, both evaded the larger corporate sins, and both failed to do what they could to rectify a cruel social order.¹⁸

Furthermore, the unstable situation created by Jim Crow had the potential to make the preacher's role one both of leadership and of compromise and even surrender: the preacher was

the man who had to proclaim the gospel and apply the law, and yet do so without ever addressing the primary fact of black existence, white supremacy. Against this background, [James Weldon] Johnson could characterize the preacher as the one "who instilled the narcotic doctrine epitomized in the spiritual, "You May Have All Dis World, But Give Me Jesus"¹⁹

¹⁷ Frazier *The Negro Church in America* 44 quoted in Ahlstrom, 710-711; Edward Franklin Frazier (September 24, 1894 - May 17, 1962), was an American sociologist. His 1932 Ph.D. dissertation *The Negro Family in Chicago*, later released as a book *The Negro Family in the United States* in 1939, analyzed the cultural and historical forces that influenced the development of the African American family from the time of slavery. The book was awarded the 1939 Anisfield Award for the most significant work in the field of race relations. This book was among the first sociological works on blacks researched and written by a black person. He helped draft the UNESCO statement *The Race Question* in 1950. [Wikipedia, consulted 7/12/2009]

¹⁸ Ahlstrom, 713 (It is possible that this judgment is as much a reflection of the intellectual orientation of its author as of an objectively certifiable reality.)

¹⁹ Quoted in Ahlstrom, 711. James Weldon Johnson (June 17, 1871 – June 26, 1938) was an American author, politician, diplomat, critic, journalist, poet, anthologist,

a form of accommodationism later associated in the minds of some with Booker T Washington.

To conclude for the moment on the topic of African-American Christianity and its principal beliefs: Jesus Christ was regarded as a personal redeemer in misfortune, and a parallel was often drawn between old testament Israelites and Blacks in slavery: God delivered the Jews from bondage, and Black American slaves could hope to be rescued as well. A similarly other-worldly vision often inhabited African-Americans, especially after the collapse of Reconstruction.

Long before Emancipation [...] black Christians had found strength and hope through their own special identification of themselves as God's Israel, as a chosen people being led out of bondage. Christian faith and "black religion" became inseparable elements of piety, belief, and aspiration. It was a composite result that stemmed from the American Negro's extraordinary situation: back of him no heritage but slavery and a rumor of Africa which was in effect but an unknown void. Free but not free in the present. Only vague intimations of America's great future destiny, but in any case no confidence that he could participate in its bounty. In the church and through religion these tragic circumstances were made to cohere.²⁰

Before the Civil War, most of the principal denominations split along sectional lines into Northern and Southern bodies. The Southern were virtually uniformly defenders of the peculiar institution and contributed greatly to the build-up of hostile sectional feeling:

As its greatest social institution, the church in the South constituted the major resource of the Confederacy in the building and maintenance of civilian morale. As no other group, Southern clergymen were responsible for a state of mind which made secession possible, and as no other group they sustained the people in their long, costly and futile War for Southern Independence.²¹

As late as 1864 the Southern Presbyterian Church took an unambiguous stand:

educator, lawyer, songwriter, and early civil rights activist. Johnson is remembered best for his writing, which includes novels, poems, and collections of folklore. He was also one of the first African-American professors at New York University. Later in life he was a professor of creative literature and writing at Fisk University. [Wikipedia consulted 08/12/2009]

²⁰ Ahlstrom, 714.

²¹ James W. Silver *Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda* (1957), quoted in Ahlstrom, 673.

We hesitate not to affirm that it is the peculiar mission of the Southern Church to conserve the institution of slavery, and to make it a blessing both to master and slave.²²

This is perhaps a measure of how deeply slavery was felt to be an integral, necessary part of white southern identity, which helps to explain why it was difficult for many white Southerners to give up the nearly religious belief in slavery, which seemed to confirm their own superiority and worth, by defining them in relation to an objectively, physically present Other. The “us/them” dichotomy that is so much a part of collective identities is readily apparent.

After the war, sometimes for years, white southern denominations remained stalwart defenders of racial hierarchies and then of racial segregation: the Southern Presbyterian Church provides another example; in 1865, after the end of hostilities, when slavery was clearly doomed, it issued this statement:

We solemnly declare to you, brethren, that the dogma which asserts the inherent sinfulness of [slavery] is unscriptural and fanatical [and] one of the most pernicious heresies of modern times...²³

Such pronouncements continued long after the 13th Amendment had put a final end to chattel slavery in the US.

In the antebellum north, some of the most energetic abolitionists were pastors and clergymen of the northern denominations; Frederick Douglass is one, Henry Ward Beecher another. Beecher, the son of Lyman, and brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, was one of the best-known preachers of the nineteenth century; before the Civil War, he took very firm stands during services in what almost appears in retrospect to be a predecessor of today’s “mega-churches”; with a congregation numbering in the thousands, he brought leg-irons and chains to the pulpit to illustrate the evils of slavery and organized auctions, in which parishioners’ bids contributed to buying slaves’ freedom. His defense of the helpless and similar actions by other pastors and preachers provided a basis for the personal commitment of the missionaries that went, sometimes at great personal risk, and always at personal expense, both financial and emotional, to the South after the War, to bring their brand of Christianity as well as more practical teachings to the freedpeople. (More about them below).

²² Quoted in Ahlstrom, 672.

²³ Quoted in Ahlstrom, 672.

Ante-bellum religious debates and controversies thus set the stage for developments after the War.

After the war ended with military defeat, the white Southern branches of the traditional Protestant denominations continued to promote what was to become a Jim Crow approach to race relations; this was all the easier for them as the freedpeople massively left white denominations and formed their own. At the same time, what has been called a “civil religion”, the “Lost Cause”, grew to occupy a central place in southern mentalities.

From the end of Reconstruction to World War II, a tangible memory of the Civil War experience, increasingly mythologized, haunted white southerners. The spiritual interpretation of Confederate defeat became a sectional civil religion—the religion of the Lost Cause.²⁴

The Lost Cause, as Charles Wilson explains, consisted in a collection of cultural memories that transformed the military defeat of the South and the abolition of slavery into a narrative of martyrdom and hopeless attachment to aristocratic and chivalric virtues defended against a backdrop of moonlight and magnolias, that made of the slave South an island of civility and refinement in a world progressively more dominated by single-mindedly materialistic northern capitalism. In this vision, the happy-go-lucky slaves were the beneficiaries of the kindly supervision of the planters, who ensured that their human property lacked for nothing by way of material comforts and spiritual guidance and instruction. The defeat itself was presented as being brought about by overwhelming numbers of Union troops, aided at key moments by turn-coat Confederate officers. Robert E Lee, the general of the army of Virginia, took on superhuman characteristics to become the savior of the South, whose dignified surrender at Appomattox approximates the crucifixion. It has been convincingly argued that the Lost Cause was itself the brain-child of an unreconstructed and unrepentant Confederate officer, Jubal Early, who moved quickly after Appomattox to write memoirs to provide a narrative of the defeat of the South that would justify a continued belief in the justice of the cause it had fought for, a South that needed desperately to find an explanation for what appeared to

²⁴ Charles Reagan Wilson, University of Mississippi, author of *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920*:
<http://www.southernspaces.org/contents/2004/wilson/print/1d.v2.htm>

“Southrons” to be an indescribably and incomprehensibly unfair outcome.²⁵

The Lost Cause provided the foundations of a collective identity in a way not dissimilar from the way that a religion might, or that patriotic attachment to a nation might. C Vann Woodward, himself an acknowledged expert on the New South, in a review entitled “The Cult of the Lost Cause”, published in 1980, concludes by suggesting that the South achieved a sense of sectional if not national identity after the defeat of the Confederacy:

Whether the postbellum unity and morale for resistance can properly be called nationalism or not, it came closer to approximating that goal than what the Confederacy achieved. With the onus of slavery off their backs, the white leaders of reaction found in race an issue that transcended class lines and secured a popular base. The term “Confederate” achieved a popularity it never enjoyed during wartime. Non-combatants were promoted to “colonels,” and authentic heroes were immortalized in marble. The cult of the Lost Cause acquired religious overtones. The one-party South and the Solid South did not arrive until later, but they were sustained and nourished on the legend of Confederate unity that was achieved after the cause was lost.²⁶

Patriotism is not, of course, the same thing as religion. It can be argued, however, that the Lost Cause should be regarded as a religious phenomenon insofar as its central belief was in a paradise unattainable from this world (because located in the past), peopled by beings whose virtues far surpass those of everyday life, watched over by the larger-than-life Robert E Lee.

Commemoration of those who had died, presumably in defense of the cause, provided a venue for the rituals of the Lost Cause:

The Confederate veteran [...] by the late nineteenth century was hailed in public ceremonies as a national hero motivated by a fundamentally American love of independence, a definition of liberty tied to states’ rights and removed from any association

²⁵ Gallagher, Gary W. *Jubal A. Early, the Lost Cause, and Civil War History: A Persistent Legacy*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1995. The published version of the Frank L. Klement lecture, the 50-odd page work argues that Early, a Confederate general, was the originator of the concept of the Lost Cause and enormously influential in developing and promoting it.

²⁶ C Vann Woodward: “The Cult of the Lost Cause”: Review of Kenneth M. Stampp’s *The Impaired Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War* - The New York Review of Books Sept 1980: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/7308>

with slavery. The depoliticization of the Confederate veteran worked in tandem with the remilitarization of Confederate ceremonies. To the sounds of "Dixie" and the cheering of 100,000 onlookers, many wearing Rebel uniforms, a massive statue of Robert E. Lee was unveiled in Richmond in 1890. Blair argues that the erection of the Lee monument, which took place amidst the waving of both Confederate and Union flags, signaled the turn towards a vision of the Lost Cause as cause for jubilation rather than mourning.²⁷

The Lost Cause further offered a kind of origins myth for the post-bellum South that made possible reconciliation with the North. By celebrating the high-minded old-fashioned virtues of the Southern aristocracy, and presenting an image of contented and well-cared-for slaves, the Lost Cause gave to the South the role of heir to virtues and values that could easily be subscribed to, and diverted attention from the astonishingly rapid divesting of the rights of the freedpeople and the increasing violence against them that grew out of what Edward Blum has called "white supremacist theology,"²⁸ which underlay the otherwise largely materialist Redeemers.²⁹

"Redemption," the efforts made by some Southerners, especially after the election of 1876-77, to modernize the South's economy, including industrialization and the construction of railroads, necessarily required the participation and cooperation of the North. Capital to build enormously expensive (though equally enormously profitable) infrastructure like railroads was to be found essentially in the financial centers of the North.

²⁷ Helen Zoe Veit. "Review of William A. Blair, *Cities of the Dead: Contesting the Memory of the Civil War in the South, 1865-1914*," H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews, January, 2007. URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=13261181230121>

²⁸ Edward J. Blum. "Review of Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era*," H-South, H-Net Reviews, May, 2005. URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=263111120850379>

²⁹ The fact that many defenders of the Lost Cause contradicted their antebellum positions to claim that the essential reason for the Civil War was the issue of states' rights, and not that of slavery (despite the ample documentary evidence to the contrary, including, but not limited to, the unambiguous protection of slavery in the Confederate Constitution), suggests a position analogous to that of the defenders of "intelligent design", who, under the pressure of circumstance, have come to clothe their position in the raiments of science, calculated to resemble that position of their detractors in order to retain even a shred of credibility. To this might be added the sense of being under constant attack, constantly beleaguered, defending a noble and virtuous cause valiantly but with little hope of victory in the end.

The terms “redeemer” and “redemption” played upon various meanings, within the context of religion and without. Indeed, using the term “redeemer” to refer to a political tendency appealed directly to a religiously motivated audience – for Christians, the redeemer, after all, is Jesus himself.

There are a number of definitions of “redeem”, of which four seem particularly relevant to a play upon religious feelings and instincts: To expiate, atone (for...); To save from a state of sin (and from its consequences); To reform, change (for the better); To restore the reputation or honor of oneself or something.

The notion of “atonement” had already been met: the South had undergone the wrenching defeat of Appomattox, and had thus paid an agonizing price for whatever sins it had committed (slavery might be among them, but race prejudice and white supremacy were surely not); salvation from a state of sin might or might not apply specifically to the South, although rescue from the alleged depredations of the Reconstruction legislature might qualify; what certainly would qualify was rescue from the corruption of the Grant administration; reform was of a piece with rescue, and the whole could only restore the reputation and honor of a region in which honor had played a central role before the Civil War.³⁰

Appealing to the notions of the “redeemer” and “redemption” thus meant laying claim to a moral as well as a political combat against the corruption that was objectively so rampant in the Grant administration: the rhetorical effect of adopting the term was to take and hold the moral high ground against a political adversary, by injecting a notion of salvation from the grasping, materialistic everyday world into political action. Grant was necessarily denigrated as the symbol of the massive power that perpetrated military defeat on the south, and, conveniently, as the facilitator if not the perpetrator of the financial scandals that blackened his presidency — what are perceived today as positive aspects of Grant’s presidency (civil rights legislation, and rooting out the Ku Klux Klan) were, from the perspective of many/most southerners, sins that were not merely venial.

³⁰ Ruth Benedict’s analysis of societies as “honor-shame” societies or “pride-guilt” societies — the difference revolves crucially around the importance attributed to the gaze and scrutiny of others — can very usefully be applied to the code duello before the War, and clearly had echoes in the structuring of race relations afterwards.

This religious content establishes a necessary link with the concept of the Lost Cause, of a prelapsarian golden age when true values were defended as a matter of course by a whole social structure that as a consequence provided an identity to each member: the gentleman slave-owner whose courtly manners were the counterpart of his manly readiness to come to the defense, armed if necessary, of the shrinking helpless lady at his side, and on the opposite end of the spectrum the African slave, whose purportedly untamed and untamable brutish appetites, including especially sexual insatiability, could only be held in check by strict observance of the social controls and hierarchy of the peculiar institution.

The notion of “redemption” is often associated with suffering: redemption in the sense of cleansing is achieved through a purifying pain, which punishes the sinner for past acts and relieves him/her of responsibility and allows him/her to begin anew. It is worth pointing out that the concept of redemptive suffering, to the extent that it is applicable to the New South, is a distortion, even a perversion of the original, however: the sufferers, in the case of the South, are not the sinners, those who inflicted slavery and degradation on others, but the others, who had suffered before. The mechanism by which this reversal is achieved is worthy of note: an example is to be found in Henry Grady’s speech to the Boston Merchant’s Association in 1889, in which he presents the white South as bearing the burden of the freedmen for the entire United States.

That the North should be prepared to hear this version of events is testimony to the profound shifts that had come about in the barely twenty years that had elapsed since the surrender at Appomattox and the adoption of the Reconstruction Amendments.

Several factors contributed to making the North more receptive to the South at the end of the century than would have been the case in 1865 or 1870.

One was simply the desire of Northerners to put behind them the conflicts and controversies of the war and move ahead with current business. Early in his Presidency, Ulysses S Grant was energetic in enforcing federal legislation that criminalized racially-motivated violence, but during his second term, he is said to have replied to requests for assistance from the Governor of Mississippi in putting down political violence that the American people were tired of the goings-on in the South and refused to provide military support.

This ebbing of support in the North for African-American rights in the South was complemented by subtle and not-so-subtle changes of position by some of the best-known and most influential figures of northern society. Some of the people who had carried high the banner of abolitionism before the adoption of the 13th Amendment shifted to a much more reconciliationist view once the Southerners had been defeated and their peculiar institution abolished. Among those whose zeal cooled were Henry Ward Beecher, his sister, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Horace Greeley. All three, for various reasons, began to perceive reconciliation with the South as a more important objective than preserving or protecting the rights of the black minority.

Some people were of course disappointed by this turn of events; missionaries who had gone to the South after the war to teach school and of course religion were bereft, abandoned by some of those whose support had seemed most obvious, after they themselves had made superhuman efforts to adapt to their novel situations. Edward J Blum, in *Reforging the White Republic*³¹, holds that during the years some of them spent in the post-Civil War South, white missionaries evolved in their perceptions of the African-Americans whose spiritual welfare they were there to try to ensure. Many at first found the newly freedpeople to be backward and uncouth in the forms of their religious expression. With time, however, the missionaries came to better understand and more fully appreciate the people they had gone to the south to serve. Anyone who made a show of helping the freedpeople, however, was a potential target for violence and in any case for the disdain of Southern whites; when they lost the support of their northern counterparts, they became even more vulnerable.

National reform movements also played a role in reducing pressure on the South to implement the Amendments and the associated enabling legislation. Barton E. Price, in a review of Joe L. Coker's *Liquor in the Land of the Lost Cause: Southern White Evangelicals and the Prohibition Movement*, reports that

Coker notes that 'prohibition offers a window into the process of the declining white attitude toward and rhetoric about blacks between 1880 and 1915, with a particular focus on the declining racial attitudes of white evangelical Christians. The religion of the Lost Cause provided a means for evangelicals to exert their

³¹ Blum, Edward J. *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898*. Conflicting worlds. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005.

cultural authority'. [...] The author begins by explaining that evangelicals were outsiders to the southern cult of honor in the antebellum years, but through the religion of the Lost Cause they redefined honor with prohibition. As evangelicals increasingly became the caretakers of southern culture, they laid claim to cultural and political authority.³²

Other authors have pointed out how the WCTU (Women's Christian Temperance Union, the most conspicuous advocate of prohibition) failed, in spite of their Christianity, to take a stand against lynching, accepting the commonplace misinformation that lynching was the only response available to beleaguered whites in their combat against sexually depraved black rapists.

In other words, the moral rectitude that underlay the abolitionist movement and that had motivated many Northerners during the War and immediately afterwards soon dissipated, leaving little in its place; southerners, however, thanks to the myth of the Lost Cause, were able to regroup, as it were, and find a regional identity and solidarity that the north no longer had. As C Vann Woodward put it:

The morale of unity and the will to resist that eluded the Confederacy were achieved by the white South after it had been thoroughly defeated and occupied. In their weakened plight, southern whites united behind the cause of white supremacy and overthrew Radical Reconstruction and the hopes for racial justice. The failure of unity, morale, and the will to prevail, as Stamppp admits, had now shifted to the North—which the South knew to be even less united on the issue of race than it had been on slavery. In fact, the North stood accused of imposing on the South standards of racial equality it would not at that time have itself endured.³³

The end result was the martyrdom implied by redemptive suffering was not suffered by the redeemers but by the African-Americans, who were denied at the best of times the most basic human rights, and all too often lynched.

One figure that I have found to be particularly appealing, though he is described by a recent biographer as "overbearing and self-righteous in

³² Barton E. Price. *The Journal of Southern Religion*. All rights reserved. ISSN 1094-5253: <http://jsr.fsu.edu/Volume11/Price.htm>

³³ C Vann Woodward: "The Cult of the Lost Cause": Review of Kenneth M. Stamppp's *The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War - The New York Review of Books* Sept 1980: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/7308>

presentation”³⁴, is a man who became a close friend of Ida Wells’³⁵, and even more importantly for the “question de civilisation de l’agrégation”, the lead attorney for Plessy; he is said to have coined the expression “color-blind” justice: Albion Tourgée³⁶.

Tourgée, though too young to become active on the political scene until after Emancipation, was motivated by what his biographer, Mark Elliott, describes as an abolitionist belief in racial equality, derived from the “religious doctrines of perfectionism that flourished during the Second Great Awakening” (of which Charles Finney was a proponent) and which “reflected a particular notion of the self that [Elliott has] termed *radical individualism*”³⁷. Tourgée was a deeply convinced supporter of public education, which made him a hero to African-Americans, but a villain to defenders of the Lost cause. At least some of his support for education came from the same source as his opposition to capital punishment, “an idea derived from his perfectionist views of human beings as capable of moral improvement”³⁸: the objective of the penal system should be to improve and reform rather than punish.

Though only twenty-nine years old at the time, the “carpetbagger” Tourgée was one of the most influential figures at the North Carolina “Gorilla convention” convened in 1867 to rewrite the state constitution. He was especially contemptuous of northern politicians (e.g., Horace Greeley, who had championed abolition before the war) that accepted conservative propaganda about “carpetbaggers” as unscrupulous parasites and post-war profiteers.

³⁴ Elliott, 9.

³⁵ In 1889, Ida Wells, who in 1884 preceded Rosa Parks in refusing to give up her seat in a whites-only car on the train, and who went on to become one of the icons of the tragically interminable campaign against lynching, became co-owner and editor of Free Speech, an anti-segregationist newspaper based at the Beale Street Baptist Church in Memphis [adapted from Wikipedia, consulted 10/12/2009].

³⁶ Albion Tourgée (May 2, 1838 – May 21, 1905) was an American soldier, Radical Republican, lawyer, judge, novelist, and diplomat. A pioneer civil rights activist, he founded the National Citizens’ Rights Association and litigated for the plaintiff Homer Plessy in the famous segregation case Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). Historian Mark Elliott credits Tourgée with introducing the metaphor of “color-blind” justice into legal discourse [Wikipedia consulted 11/12/2009].

³⁷ Mark Emory Elliott. *Color-Blind Justice Albion Tourgée and the Quest for Racial Equality From the Civil War to Plessy V. Ferguson*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 7.

³⁸ Elliott, 130.

One of Tourgée's objectives in the new constitution was to provide for public education, for both black and white children. Elliott points out the paradox that Tourgée, in order to press for public education in the new constitution, was driven by public reluctance to establish racially integrated schools to propose an amendment that would have created "separate but equal" schools, though with a difference from the railroad cars Homer Plessy was supposed to ride in: his proposal did not require but permitted separate schools, on condition they should be equal.³⁹

The principle of desegregated schools was one that got support even in the 1870s from other well-known politicians: Charles Sumner presented a bill in Congress in the early 1870s that would have prohibited racial segregation in schools. It ran afoul, however, of racism in both South and North, and is thought by some to have triggered a backlash that meant the beginning of the end for Reconstruction.

Much of Tourgée's career was involved in writing, including a number of works of fiction, the best-known of which, and the most successful, was *A Fool's Errand, By One of the Fools* (1879), which was based upon his experience as a reforming carpetbagger after the Civil War. Along the way, Tourgée developed a variety of "Christian socialism" and social gospel: a blend of Christian ethics and a belief in democratic government based upon the golden rule as a measure of Christian conduct:

Neither [Christianity nor democracy] can fully secure the results it professes without the cooperation of the other... Christianity and good citizenship are identical.⁴⁰

In his brief to the Supreme Court in the Plessy case, Tourgée commented that "Justice is pictured blind[folded], and her daughter, the Law, ought at least to be color-blind"⁴¹, using a metaphor he had already employed years before, in a letter to the editor of the *North Carolina Standard* in 1870.

Elliott observes that Tourgée's choice in 1896 to push for an end to segregation had catastrophic effects, somewhat like the backlash in the 1874 mid-term elections and the collapse of reconstruction that followed.⁴² Rather than putting an end to racial discrimination, the

³⁹ Elliott, 129.

⁴⁰ Tourgée quoted in Elliott, 221-222.

⁴¹ Quoted in Elliott, 4.

⁴² Elliott, 185.

Plessy case draped it in the respectability of established Constitutional law. The idealism and faith that underlay his action were brought down by a combination of circumstances that Edward Blum sums up in the title of his work about the period: *Reforging the White Republic*.

Even his literary efforts were eclipsed by a man Elliott describes as a "spell-binding [Baptist] preacher" whose favorite themes were "nationalism, imperial expansion and white racial unity". Thomas Dixon went on to become the author of *The Clansman*, upon which DW Griffith's film *The Birth of A Nation* was based; both celebrate the role of the Ku Klux Klan in ridding the battered South of the evils of Negro rule and confirmed and consolidated what had become the preconceptions and prejudices of a reunited United States. The Lost Cause was not so thoroughly lost as the term might lead one to expect.

The "question de civilization" ends with 1896, but it is of the utmost importance to keep in mind that the Plessy decision was not the end and culmination of segregation but, on the contrary, the beginning of a period in which segregation and Jim Crow were greatly strengthened, founded on the firmly established constitutional doctrine of "separate but equal". Segregation and racial discrimination, both official and not (the Woodrow Wilson administration the segregated the army and the federal civil service; lynching was virtually condoned by Southern state legislatures and winked at by Congress and the North, and generally blamed on the victims ["Negro rapists"]) became the norms of American society for the next 60 years, during which, despite the Redeemers, the South remained an economic backwater, devoting its energies to holding in peonage a very large minority of its population, and condemning itself thereby to the status of an underdeveloped region.

It was only after *Brown vs Board of Education* overturned Plessy and opened the door a crack for the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s that the South began to catch up with the rest of the nation, once Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr had found the strength to pursue their political goals in their religion.