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John Hayes

FROM CHRIST-HAUNTED REGION TO ANOMIC ANYPLACE: RELIGION IN THE 20TH CENTURY SOUTH

"While the South is hardly Christ-centered," Flannery O'Connor memorably declared in 1960 on the college lecture circuit, "it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows."[1] A Catholic in a regional sea of Protestants, a single woman in a patriarchal culture, a writer and intellectual living on a farm in rural Georgia, O'Connor in these remarks tersely and brilliantly evoked something elemental about the mid-20th century South: that its denizens—women and men, rich and poor, black and white—couldn't imagine themselves in wholly secular, "modern" categories; they were shaped in indelible ways by theological imagination and longings for sacred reality. The South's public square, as a basic consequence, was noticeably not "naked," but clothed in all sorts of ways by the traces and trappings of religion, specifically Protestant Christianity.

With her first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952), O'Connor opened a window onto this Christ-haunted region. The protagonist Hazel Motes is driven by a relentless urge to repudiate the Christianity of his rural upbringing, and yet, try fervently and violently as he might, he can't shake the faith that obsesses him. On the city streets he confronts traveling evangelists with stark admonitions to repent and pamphlets beckoning "Jesus Calls You," while a drive into the countryside brings him to a roadside boulder that thunders to passersby in large white letters, "Woe to the Blasphemer and Whoremonger! Will Hell Swallow You Up?"[2] As a boy Hazel "saw

[1] F. O'Connor, *Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction*, [in:] *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. S. Fitzgerald, R. Fitzgerald, New York 1969, p. 44–45.

[2] F. O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, New York 1962, p. 41, 75.

Jesus 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 where he was not sure of his footing," and in the end, the wild ragged Jesus claims him as Hazel becomes a vivid Protestant ascetic and martyr, suffering in conscious imitation of Christ.[3]

Yet *Wise Blood* also portrayed what O'Connor meant when she precisely qualified the South as not Christ-centered, but rather Christ-haunted. No sentimentalist, but rather a grotesque realist who punctured regional mythologies, O'Connor showed in fiction how Christianity was much more a haunting, shadowy ghost than a cultural orientation point in the South of the mid-20th century. Hazel Motes is obsessed with belief and disbelief as he comes to the city of Taulkinham, and yet most people he encounters regard his open, public wrestling with faith as tacky and impolite, somewhat beyond the pale for respectable society. On a train in the opening scene of the novel, returning to the South after four years in the army, Motes sits across from a proper Southern lady, Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock. In the awkwardness of their forced intimacy, Hazel leans forward and hints at his disbelief with a taunt:

> "I reckon you think you been redeemed," he said.
> Mrs. Hitchcock snatched at her collar.
> "I reckon you think you been redeemed," he repeated.
> She blushed. After a second she said yes, life was an inspiration and then she said she was hungry…[4]

Beginning with this scene, much of the novel's overt humor comes from the wide disparity between Hazel Motes' deep-rooted assumptions about the regional culture he is trying to repudiate, and the actual culture as it responds to his flagrant repudiations. Motes assumes the culture is Christ-centered, and tries violently to destroy that Christian imprint, but instead he meets with widespread apathy, or puzzlement that someone would be so worked up about religion. In a climactic scene near the novel's end, Motes' landlady Mrs. Flood confronts him about his newly ascetic way of life. Horrified when she sees that he has wrapped his chest with barbed wire, she drops the lunch tray and cries out, "Mr. Motes, what do you do these things for? It's not natural."

> After a second he began to button the shirt. "It's natural," he said.
> "Well, it's not normal. It's like one of them gory stories, it's something that people have quit doing—like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up cats," she said. "There's no reason for it. People have quit doing it."
> "They ain't quit doing it as long as I'm doing it," he said.[5]

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 22.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 14.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 224.

Insisting that he does it because he is "not clean," Motes speaks past Mrs. Flood in this confrontation. She responds with a sarcastic dismissal (which, ironically, more directly states Motes' Christianity more than he does): "You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn't do these foolish things."[6] For Mrs. Flood, Motes has taken religion to the level of fanaticism, behaving like an irrational saint from a more primitive, bygone era. Christianity has a place in her South, but its place is tightly circumscribed and contained within the bounds of good sense and respectability. Indeed it might be dangerous if the society were Christ-centered. Too much Jesus, by her reckoning, has driven Hazel Motes crazy.

This essay uses Flannery O'Connor's writings, written and published in the 1950s and early 60s, as a point of orientation for exploring and explaining religion in the American South. O'Connor's *oeuvre* appeared at a vital moment in regional history: when the once-marginal, heavily-agricultural, "solid" Democratic political economy was rapidly transformed into the booming, bustling "Sunbelt" of suburbs, industry, and Republicans; and when the long-established regional tradition of white supremacy came under open attack from the Civil Rights movement, making overt racism untenable for the first time, inaugurating a new officially "colorblind" social order. This vital moment also marked a watershed in regional religious dynamics, the demise of a world that had been a long time in the making, and the beginning of something quite new. In this time of flux, O'Connor observed and articulated the force that religion held in the South with unusual insight and depth of perception. She was of course a professional writer of fiction, not a journalist, sociologist, historian, or theologian *per se*, yet her fictional world (and the reflections on it she presented in lecture and essay) captured real-world phenomena of religion in the modern South without peer. As she insisted in a college lecture, beneath the violent grotesquery and mystical imagery of her fiction, she was a realist, a "realist of distances," after a "deeper kind of realism."[7] Her fiction will thus be our entry point in making sense of religion in the modern South.

The essay will also interrogate two other foundational statements from the era—Walker Percy's 1961 novel *The Moviegoer* and Martin Luther King's 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail"—to bring into sharper focus religious phenomena that appear only in the periphery of O'Connor's imaginative vision. Percy's novel highlights just how much the region was changing, and points the way forward to the emergent Sunbelt, a world of optimism, amnesia, and anomie. King's letter emphasizes how a seemingly-common religion could take radically different shapes in relation to regional white supremacy, and how and why the Civil Rights movement sought to provoke a crisis moment in regional religion. Juxtaposed with O'Connor, Percy's novel and King's letter delineate the basic factors in religion in the South at a vital moment in its history.

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[6] *Ibidem*, p. 225.

[7] F. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 39, 44.

Together, and through the context they have established, these writings frame and elucidate religious life in the post-60s South, that of contemporary visibility and experience.

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In Hazel Motes' confrontations with Mrs. Hitchcock and Mrs. Flood, we can catch a glimpse of two distinct, different strains of religion in the mid-20th century South: one urban, respectable, sensible, and domesticated, embodied in propertied women; the other rural in origin, at odds with social propriety, disruptive, demanding obsession, and manifest in an impoverished, uncouth man. Making sense of these distinct strains, both of which appear throughout O'Connor's subsequent writings, requires at least a thumbnail sketch of the region's religious history. Though the two strains are relatively modern (only coalescing in the late 19th century), to rightly characterize them one must begin with "the South" in its earliest manifestation—as a handful of colonies of England.

The colonial South was a satellite of the home country in a variety of ways, but none more so than its centering on the Church of England. With the parish as a basic unit of political order, churches placed strategically at centers of population density, taxes funding the maintenance of the church, and prominent gentry holding positions on the vestry, the Church of England dominated the southern colonial public square. These colonies embodied the traditional idea that a common, official religion was the glue that held a society together. The colonial South might aptly be called the Anglican frontier. But in the 1760s and 70s, two English dissenting groups, the Baptists and Methodists, began to appear and beckon people away from the official, established, public religion, and into close-knit, exclusivist communities marked by social withdrawal and austerity, inward piety and open display of emotion (in the community of fellow believers), and above all, a decisive conversion experience. In the classic categories of Ernst Troeltsch, these Baptists and Methodists were "sects," calling people away from the all-encompassing social world—even one with a very public church—and into smaller island communities of the truly converted, where genuine Christianity was to be found. In the social context of the South, a gentry-dominated milieu marked by inclusive public religion, the conviviality of the "pub" and the dance, the open competition of the horse race or cock fight, and the overt display of wealth and power, the exclusivist, austere, emotion-sharing, inward-focused Baptists and Methodists represented a "counterculture."[8]

This countercultural movement gained followers during the American Revolution and on its heels, and in a politics-makes-strange-bedfellows alliance with leading rationalist republicans like Jefferson and Madison, Baptists and Methodists

[8] R. Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia 1740–1790*, Chapel Hill 1999, p. 163.

pushed for the dismantling of established religion and the creation of a secular state. This strange alliance succeeded in its aims, first with Virginia's Statue for Religious Freedom (1786), then with the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (1789), and then in a growing succession of states into the early 19th century. Despite these political victories and their growing numbers, Baptists and Methodists as of 1813 claimed as members less than 1/5 of the regional population.[9] The reorganized Church of England, the Episcopal church, still enjoyed considerable power and prestige, especially among the planter elite, and so did the church that the growing numbers of Scottish and Scotch-Irish descendants sustained, the Presbyterian. Furthermore, many in the new republic, North and South, found secular pursuits—political office, amassing wealth through trade or agriculture, military glory—to be satisfying ends in their own right.

With widespread regional conversion to "evangelical" Christianity as their principal goal, leading Baptist pastors and Methodist bishops began to trim the more countercultural elements of their religion, and craft a movement more palatable to the person that held power in the antebellum South: the white male head of household who exerted patriarchal authority over his dependents—women, children, and, for planters and prosperous yeomen, slaves. In the late 18th century, evangelical (Baptist or Methodist) converts called each other "brother" and "sister," women exhorted and prophesied as "mothers in Israel," slaves and free blacks preached to biracial audiences, and unmarried, itinerant young men were the most publicly visible bearers of the evangelical message. In the early 19th century, male evangelical leaders sought to shift the movement away from these countercultural activities, downplaying the leveling language of "brother" and "sister," circumscribing the leadership of women, separating whites and blacks into different meetings or even churches, and modeling the evangelical preacher into a settled, married, proper head of household, a gentleman. By the 1830s, Baptists and Methodists were founding colleges to train these new evangelical gentlemen, and by the 1840s, they were crafting extensive theological defenses of southern slavery as an institution ordained by God, within which the evangelical patriarch could show love and care for his inferior dependents.[10]

Yet even as the Baptists and Methodists changed themselves in various ways to conform to the shape of power in the South, even as they moved from counterculture to accommodation to and even overt defense of the regional status quo, even as they became the leading groups in sheer membership numbers, they did not make it into the center of the halls of power in the antebellum South. The leading planters who organized and fought for the Confederacy, for example, were overwhelmingly Episcopalian and Presbyterian—Methodists and Baptists were no more numerable in Confederate leadership than Catholics.[11] Antebellum southern

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[9] C. Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, Chapel Hill 1997, p. 265.

[10] *Ibidem*.

[11] J. Wakelyn, *Biographical Dictionary of the Confederacy*, Westport 1977, p. 529–533.

culture was still very much shaped by the conviviality of alcohol and dancing, by open competition, by an aggressive, violent code of honor, like South Carolina Rep. Preston Brooks displayed on the floor of Congress when he caned Massachusetts Sen. Charles Sumner in 1856, like secessionists manifested when they denounced Lincoln's election as the final stroke of dishonor they could stand, like W.J. Cash evoked when he wrote of the archetypal white Southern man that his deepest conviction was "that nothing living could cross him and get away with it."[12]

Only after the Civil War did Baptists and Methodists move into the centers of social and cultural power. The patriarchal planter in whose image antebellum evangelical leaders had sought to refashion themselves suffered, in a variety of ways, serious de-legitimization in the crisis of the Civil War: through the shame of military defeat, through the end of slavery, through the death and maiming of war, through new economic incentives that encouraged merchants and industrial entrepreneurs. In this time of flux and uncertainty, male evangelical clergy and evangelical women came to the forefront and became instrumental in crafting a "New South." They sought to fashion a new social order in the evangelical image, making their austerity the regional standard, curbing aggressive competition and the braggadocio of the code of honor, encouraging very public displays of piety and the decisive conversion experience.[13] In the typology of Troeltsch, they sought to become the "church" of the New South.

Through the centralized bureaucracy of the denominations they built, the colleges they sustained and continued to found, religious newspapers and periodicals, voluntary organizations and women's clubs, and political lobbying, Baptists and Methodists largely succeeded in their goals. The austere ethos once regulated by internal church discipline became, in southern state after southern state in the early 20th century, the social norm and official law, most visibly in prohibition and Sabbath observance laws. Baptists and Methodists built imposing "First" churches in central places in the towns and cities that sprouted in the New South, and massive "revival" meetings calling for evangelical conversion became staple activities in the new urban landscape. Evangelicals transformed the old masculine code of honor into a new mode of "respectability:" the ideal person, man or woman, would display not power over others, but rather self-mastery, through the control of base appetites, wild urges, and profligate extravagances.[14] By the early decades of the 20th century this evangelical New South-building was complete, as church membership (overwhelmingly in Baptist and Methodist congregations) became almost a prerequisite of social propriety and communal belonging.[15] On the masthead of

[12] B. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, Oxford 1982; W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, New York 1941, p. 46.

[13] T. Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South 1865–1920*, Chapel Hill 1990.

[14] P. Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities Among Southern Baptists 1865–1925*, Chapel Hill 1997, p. 77–106.

[15] S. Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis*, Boston 1966.

their newspaper *Our Home Field* the Baptists could depict evangelical Christianity as the sturdy pillars supporting the "temple" of the Republic, while Methodist millionaire and Coca-Cola founder Asa Candler, when donating $1 million to the Methodists' Emory College, could claim that evangelical Christianity in the South made for "a blessed civilization crowned with piety and peace."[16]

Yet even as evangelicals fashioned the New South in their own image, even as they moved completely from withdrawn exclusivist sects to widely-embracing churches planted in the center of a "Christian civilization," they were undergoing changes in identity. With new seminaries and divinity schools, and their expanded colleges, they took substantial steps to formally credentialize their ministers—inspired preachers made sense in the early days, but the New South minister needed to be a formally-educated professional, commanding respect in the ranks of lawyers, doctors, and teachers. The conversion experience became less and less mystical and more and more moral, a moment when the convert made a decision to live uprightly and shun idle conviviality and aggressive competition.[17] Respectability as a new evangelical ideal was open to women and blacks in a way that the culture of honor never had been, and yet this new ethos was signified, not only by austere self-mastery, but also positively, through clean, refined clothing and upright, well-mannered comportment—true Christianity was not primarily inward anymore, but now could be and should be outwardly manifest in, ironically, an evangelical culture of display.[18] In concert with national trends, evangelical imagery in song and sermon was becoming feminized and domesticated: mother and home appeared as dominant new metaphors in evangelical discourse.[19] The feminized piety of New York Methodist Fanny Crosby's gospel songs filled southern Baptist and Methodist hymnals, and the congregation could sing of being "safe in the arms of Jesus/ safe on his gentle breast," of how for each Christian "Jesus is tenderly calling thee home," of the "blessed assurance" that came from knowing that "Jesus is mine."[20] The "cult of domesticity," that innovation of Northern evangelicals in the 1820s and 30s, spread in the newly-capitalist New South: competitive men would enter the amoral world of the market to provide for their families, pious women would rule the home and make it a place, coequal with the church, for Christian instruction and moral education. In addition to these feminizing and moralizing changes, Southern evangelicalism was showing a distinct new "bourgeois" or middle class imprint.[21] The old ethos of austerity was reworked to emphasize thrift, frugality, and hard work as markers of "respectable" Christian behavior. Ironically, even as

[16] "Our Home Field" 1899, Vol. 9 (July), p. 12; K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century*, New York 1964, p. 35.

[17] T. Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, p. 144–164.

[18] J. Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African-American Religion in the Delta 1875–1915*, Oxford 2008.

[19] A. Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, New York 1977.

[20] *The Modern Hymnal*, Nashville 1926, p. 262, 331, 348; *The Cokesbury Hymnal*, Nashville 1923, p. 150, 201, 254.

[21] C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, Baton Rouge 1951, p. 171; P. Harvey, *Redeeming the South*, p. 78.

the region as a whole came to experience a new widespread poverty, leading Baptists and Methodists became vocal proponents of what Max Weber, across the Atlantic, called the "Protestant work ethic."[22] They assumed a basic economic justice in the world: that right living would bring prosperity and tangible blessing. Thus was evangelical Christianity, a countercultural alternative when it first appeared in the South in the Revolutionary era, reconfigured and reimagined as a pillar and foundation of the southern social order a century and a half later.

This evangelical New South, crafted in the half-century after the Civil War, was the society that prominent journalist H.L. Mencken observed and named the "Bible Belt" in the mid-1920s. The basic features of this Bible Belt were sustained into the 1960s, despite internecine theological division (the Fundamentalist/Modernist struggle), despite restorationist movements that beckoned people into new exclusivist sects (Holiness and Pentecostalism), despite the presence of smaller religious groups (Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Catholics, Lutherans, Jews, Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ), despite rival wings that pursued social reform/activism and those that shunned or denounced it, despite major structural change in the region beginning in the 1930s. So powerful was this Bible Belt, this evangelical South, that in the 1960s academic historians who were also lay evangelicals could lament that Baptist/Methodist churches were trapped in "cultural captivity," that their social power had put them dangerously "at ease in Zion," that unless these churches recovered a prophetic, sectarian voice, they would soon face a "crisis" for which they were badly unprepared.[23] The only regional analogue for this "Baptist-Methodist hegemony," it seemed, lay in the Democratic party of the "solid South."[24]

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O'Connor's characters inhabit this Bible Belt: they live and move in a world where evangelical Christianity's cultural place is a given. It is a constitutive, elemental social factor that needs no justification or defense; it is simply part of the way things are, a pillar of society. When Hazel Motes first approaches Mrs. Flood looking to rent a room, he tells her he is a preacher, of the "Christ Without Christ." "Protestant?" she asks, "or something foreign?"—in unconscious satire that reveals both her religious apathy, and the ready regional assumption of Protestantism's at-homeness in the South.[25] In "Good Country People" the Bible salesman Manley Pointer chides Mrs. Hopewell for lacking what many in the region proudly display, a family Bible in the parlor, even as, in "Revelation," the radio in a doctor's office

[22] M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London 1930 [1904–1905]).

[23] J. Lee Eighmy, *Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists*, Knoxville 1972; R. Spain, *At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists 1865–1900*, Nashville 1967.

[24] S. Hill et al, *Religion and the Solid South*, Nashville 1972.

[25] F. O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, p. 106.

plays gospel music for all to hear: "when I looked up and He looked down…and wona these days I know I'll we-eara crown."[26] Julian's mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" claims that she can demonstrate Christian "graciousness" towards anyone, and while her son acts with bitter spite and abstract notions of solidarity, she reaches out to people on the bus as neighbors, giving a little boy a penny in a display of Christian charity.[27] The Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," in the crisis moment of the story, implores the Misfit to simply "pray" and signify that he is, in fact, "a good man." As he violently, verbally denies Christianity, her begging rises to a fever pitch: "Jesus! You've got good blood! I know you wouldn't shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray!"[28] In these various instances, evangelical Christianity, niceness, goodness, graciousness, optimism, home, and at-homeness are all part of a well-woven cultural matrix.

In O'Connor's only story set outside the South, "Judgement Day," T.C. Tanner reveals the deep imprint of his southern imaginative framework as he struggles to make sense of life in New York City, where he lives with his daughter. She urges him to stop looking out the window and thinking morbid thoughts, and instead to turn around and watch the television, for "inspiration and an out-let." "The Judgement is coming," Tanner defiantly insists, shunning idle entertainment, "the sheep'll be separated from the goats. Them that kept their promises from them that didn't." In his brief, tense encounters with his daughter's neighbor, a black actor, Tanner continually insists that the actor must be another southern expatriate, that he is from south Alabama, that he is a preacher. In the violent climax, the actor has had enough of what he sees as Tanner's racist patronizing, and he explodes, "I'm not no preacher! I'm not even no Christian. I don't believe that crap. There ain't no Jesus and there ain't no God." Tanner cannot imagine that this could not be so. "And you ain't black, and I ain't white!" he yells back in "tough as an oak knot" insistence that Christianity's truth is as self-evident as skin color. Even at the end, as he is dying, Tanner begs the actor for help in the only cultural framework he can imagine. "Hep me up, Preacher. I'm on my way home!"[29]

Even more than T.C. Tanner, Ruby Turpin in "Revelation" embodies the extent to which evangelical Christianity has become a constitutive, supportive factor in the southern cultural-social framework. As she sits with her husband Claud in the waiting room of the doctor's office, mentally singing along to the gospel songs she knows by heart, Mrs. Turpin surveys her neighbors and fits everyone into a clear place. She talks easily with a "pleasant lady" like herself, tries to distance herself from a "white-trash woman" with bad manners and tacky clothes, and patronizes a black boy by talking to him as if he knows nothing of the world. Of the "white-trash woman" she thinks to herself, "if you gave them [poor whites] everything,

[26] Idem, *The Complete Stories*, New York 1971, p. 278, 490.

[27] *Ibidem*, p. 407.

[28] *Ibidem*, p. 131–132.

[29] *Ibidem*, p. 541, 545, 549.

in two weeks it would all be broken or filthy or they would have chopped it up for lightwood…Help them you must, but help them you couldn't." To the "pleasant lady" Mrs. Turpin discusses the laziness of her black "help:" "We found enough niggers to pick our cotton this year but Claud he had to go after them and take them home again in the evening. They can't walk that half a mile…I tell you, I sure am tired of buttering up niggers." What Ruby Turpin says and does in the doctor's office is merely an extension of what she thinks to herself as she lies awake at night. In these moments, she thinks about the social types of the region as she sees it, "respectable" whites, "white-trash," and "niggers." These categories are the spark for Mrs. Turpin's gratitude to Jesus in prayer, for she realizes that

> He had not made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly! He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus, thank you! she said. Thank you thank you thank you! Whenever she counted her blessings she felt as buoyant as if she weighed one hundred and twenty-five pounds instead of one hundred and eighty.

Mrs. Turpin's gratitude that Jesus made her who she is flows into various behaviors and sayings. Smiling "just makes you feel better all over," she insists to the pleasant lady, and her eyes are marked by small wrinkles from "laughing too much." Though she judges people by clothing and comportment, she still draws distinctions between internal and external moral worth: "it was one thing to be ugly and another to act ugly." She sees herself as a charitable, generous woman, and "to help anybody out that needed it was her philosophy of life. She never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent." Mrs. Turpin is pretty sure that such good manners are a distinct southern virtue, traceable to the Christianity of the region—and notably lacking "way up north," with its secularized culture and college students who read books like *Human Development*.

Mrs. Turpin's physical heaviness is a marker, for the narrator, of her social and cultural complacency, one that has the explicit sanction of evangelical Christianity. To the "pleasant lady" she spills the private thoughts of her prayers into public conversation in the doctor's office.

> "If it's one thing I am," Mrs. Turpin said with feeling, "it's grateful…I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is! It could have been different…Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!'" she cried aloud.

At just this moment she is attacked by a college student home from Wellesley, the "ugly" girl who had been reading *Human Development*. "Go back to hell from where you came from, you old wart hog," the outraged girl whispers to Mrs. Turpin just before being sedated and pulled away from almost strangling her. Back on her farm, reflecting on this shocking outburst, Mrs. Turpin becomes full of righteous anger as she realizes that "this message had been given to Ruby Turpin,

a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman." "What do you send me a message like that for?" she asks God, baffled and furious.

In this one character O'Connor has embodied all of the basic features of the evangelicalism of the post-Civil War New South, of the Bible Belt: the principle pious figure is a woman, a *lady*, secure in her social position, displaying respectability through clean clothes (even clean hogs on her farm) and good manners, living by the Protestant work ethic, demonstrating Christian behavior through church attendance, generosity towards neighbor, and gratitude towards the Jesus she knows in characteristic evangelical immediacy. Her evangelical Christianity is easily articulated in the public sphere: even in the publicity of the doctor's office, she pours forth her private piety in conversation with the pleasant lady. And because Jesus made "everything the way it is," she must confront Jesus for answers to everything, even the startling "message" He sends through the violent Wellesley girl.[30]

As O'Connor has set up the story, the reader can immediately see the complacency and self-satisfaction that Ruby Turpin embodies and yet is utterly blind to. A proper evangelical in the Bible Belt, she is thoroughly "at ease in Zion." The reader also can see past Mrs. Turpin's conscious gratitude to her own unconscious anxiety for defining everyone's proper "place"—with her own place being self-imagined as, unsurprisingly, on the top of society's moral-religious hierarchy. Through the satire of the story's plot and protagonist, O'Connor captures what the evangelicals both gained and lost when they transformed themselves, in the course of a century and a half, from countercultural "sect" to regional "church." In crafting the New South's Bible Belt they made respectability the dominant code of the region, imagined a Protestant work ethic and basic economy of just desserts, valorized the "lady" in the cult of domesticity, and gave their immediacy with the divine a feminized, pietistic cast. At the same time, they became defanged and declawed: their Christianity lost the power to bite, and became a sacred sanction for the *status quo*. It became a little too easy and too obvious; disruptive messages had to come from outsiders, in moments of violent confrontation. Inwardness—an original focal point of early evangelicals—had declined notably, and now external criteria (clothing, hygiene, manners) could mark "place" in the socioreligious hierarchy. The other basic focal point of early evangelicalism, the conversion experience, had become less and less the anxious sinner's confrontation with God, and more and more the confident, willful self-inauguration of a life of upright respectability and social propriety.

What this evangelical hegemony also meant, O'Connor shows with a remarkable awareness of irony, is that Christianity in the Bible Belt became compartmentalized and confined. Upbeat gospel songs might play on the public radio, and Ruby Turpin might verbalize her grateful piety in a public place, but the more disruptive, disturbing, prophetic elements of Christianity got pushed to the regional margins. It is only back on her farm, away from others, with hogs and the countryside as

[30] *Ibidem*, p. 488–509.

her companions, that Mrs. Turpin can come to terms with her unsettling message from God. In *Wise Blood* Mrs. Hitchcock and Mrs. Flood had to similarly push Hazel Motes' taunting theological question and egregious ascetic display away from them. Disruptive religious questions, physical behavior that seemed to make no sense, had to be imaginatively marginalized. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find" the Grandmother—and indeed, everyone else who reads the newspapers—has to imagine the cold-blooded killer as "the Misfit." His sheer violence for its own sake is so far beyond the pale that he must be imaginatively dehumanized: he's not really a human being, but a monster.

The farm owner Mrs. May gives the most succinct expression of this ironic religious compartmentalization in "Greenleaf." On her dairy farm is a tenant family, the Greenleafs. Mrs. May has nothing but condescension for Mrs. Greenleaf, in particular, and she notes that

> the yard around her [Mrs. Greenleaf's] house looked like a dump and her five girls were always filthy; even the youngest one dipped snuff. Instead of making a garden or washing their clothes, her preoccupation was what she called "prayer healing."

Mrs. May, like Mrs. Turpin, is a respectable lady, and she has named her sons after evangelical heroes, Wesley and Scofield. She looks down on the Greenleafs as "scrub-human," but what especially makes her recoil is Mrs. Greenleaf's tacky, enthusiastic, earthy Christianity. When she finds Mrs. Greenleaf in the woods, sprawled on the ground and praying passionately in a seeming trance, she is horrified and asks what in the world she is doing. Mrs. Greenleaf, still in the trance, simply groans "Jesus, Jesus."

> Mrs. May winced. She thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building like other words inside the bedroom. She was a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true. "What is the matter with you?" she asked sharply.[31]

The narrator brings out the ironies of Mrs. May: that religion gets confined to church, (and also home); that one could be a good Christian woman, and yet not actually believe.[32] Her respectable, domestic, official evangelicalism—that of the visible Bible Belt—has become what the early evangelicals said colonial Anglicanism was: officially all-embracing and yet practically compartmentalized, touching only some elements of life; external show rather than inward passion; a moral summons for social propriety rather than a transcendent, sacred, and possibly disruptive force.

[31] *Ibidem*, p. 315–317.

[32] See also L. Pope, *Millhands and Preachers*, New Haven 1942.

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In characters like Mrs. May, Mrs. Turpin, Mrs. Hitchcock and Mrs. Flood, O'Connor shows how the Bible Belt South was actually not "Christ-centered," but rather organized by an ironic compartmentalizing of evangelical Christianity. This was one strain of religion in the South, certainly the most publicly visible and the one that has attracted the vast majority of scholarly analysis. Yet in the characters that confront these comfortable evangelicals—in Hazel Motes and Mrs. Greenleaf—O'Connor's fiction shows the powerful presence of another very different strain of regional religion. If in the first type of character we meet propertied people who speak well, have good hygiene, and good manners, in the second type we encounter impoverished folk with rough grammar, cheap clothes, and a lifestyle not too far removed from the earth. They live in the Bible Belt, and they are religious too, but their religion, like their place in the social hierarchy, is quite different. If in the first type of character we can see the dominant, most visible evangelicalism of the South, in the second type we can discern a less-visible, culturally marginalized, but actually more powerful "folk" form of evangelicalism.

The protagonists of O'Connor two novels, Hazel Motes and Francis Marion Tarwater in *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), embody this folk religion, as do the Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Bevel Summers in "The River," Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person," Wendell and Cory in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," Manley Pointer in "Good Country People," the Greenleaf family in "Greenleaf," Rufus Johnson in "The Lame Shall Enter First," O.E. Parker in "Parker's Back," T.C. Tanner in "Judgement Day," and Mason Tarwater in *The Violent Bear It Away.* These folk believers share a number of common features: they are typically impoverished country people or from rural backgrounds, their speech is unpolished, they wear humble clothes like overalls or inexpensive suits, and their demeanor is rough and earthy. In the dominant social hierarchy as articulated by Ruby Turpin, these characters are "poor white trash." Yet it is precisely in such unrespectable characters that O'Connor fictionally explores the deepest struggles of Christian faith and unbelief. The real-world presence of these folk Christians, their actual tangible reality in the South, allowed for an unusual artistic alliance. O'Connor—a propertied, ostensibly proper southern lady, a well-read Catholic—made these impoverished folk Protestants her central characters. On the lecture circuit in 1963, she voiced her own sense of religious affinity with these folk Christians when she said of herself,

> I think he [the Catholic novelist] will feel a good deal more kinship with backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than he will with those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development. His interest and sympathy may very well go—as I know my own

does—directly to those aspects of Southern life where the religious feeling is most intense and where its outward forms are farthest from the Catholic…[33]

A contemporary reviewer poked fun at O'Connor and her "God-intoxicated hillbillies," but the condescension belonged to the mainstream reviewer (and to proper Southern people of the class of Mrs. Turpin)—not to O'Connor.[34] "When the poor hold sacred history in common," O'Connor went on to argue the same lecture, "they have ties to the universal and the holy, which allows the meaning of their every action to be heightened and seen under the aspect of eternity."[35] Her fiction, grounded in a Catholic theological imagination that departed from dismissive ridicule and instead found kinship and sympathy with the region's Protestant poor, is one of the best sources we have for delineating the main features of Southern folk religion.

The Christianity of folk religion was not a pillar of the social order, not a constitutive element of the regional framework, but rather a transcendent, prophetic force that disrupted the order of the world. "Jesus thown everything off balance," the Misfit twice declares to the Grandmother, rejecting her appeals to pray and be nice and good, insisting instead that Jesus' world-disturbance calls either for utterly self-giving faith, or radical repudiation of faith through the dark hedonism of violence.[36] "Believe Jesus or the Devil! Testify to one or the other!" the folk preacher Bevel Summers cries in "The River," offering his hearers two radically different ways to live, both religious. He juxtaposes the "River of Life" in which he stands, which flows mystically into the "Kingdom of Christ," with the ordinary world, a world ultimately of death and alienation. When the little boy is thrust into his arms for baptism, the preacher tells him pointedly that once baptized, "you won't be the same again…you'll count," that his life would take on religious meaning that it hadn't gained from the ordinary patterns of society.[37] Summers, like the "prophet" Mason Tarwater, like the anti-preacher Hazel Motes, like the young preachers Wendell and Cory, like the faith healer Mrs. Greenleaf, doesn't have formal credentials. He is not a professionalized minister, but a mystically-inspired preacher of a transcendent word.

O'Connor situates many of her folk believers in settings that evoke this sense of Christianity as a transcendent, disruptive force. In *The Violent Bear It Away* Mason Tarwater lives in an isolated clearing in the woods, reachable only by a rugged footpath. From this clearing, Powderhead, he ventures forth into the wider world of "the city" to speak his prophetic message. Hazel Motes, though he seeks to actively repudiate the folk religion of his upbringing, similarly is out of place in

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[33] F. O'Connor, *The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South*, [in:] *Mystery and Manners*, p. 207.

[34] "Time" 1960, Vol. 75, No. 9 (February 29), p. 118.

[35] F. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 203.

[36] Idem, *Complete Stories*, p. 131.

[37] *Ibidem*, p. 168.

the city of Taulkinham—he has fled the vanished rural community of Eastrod where, he learns when he returns from four years in the Army, he doesn't have a place any longer anyway. Rufus Johnson in "The Lame Shall Enter First" and the Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" both signify through speech, dress, and manners that they come from folk religious backgrounds, and in both stories they appear as social outcasts who disturb convention and propriety. Similarly, Manley Pointer, another character from the folk religious background, is a drifter and enigmatic peddler who appears briefly to violently disrupt the Hopewell family.

Surely it is not accidental that most of O'Connor's folk believers are men. If the respectable Ruby Turpin symbolized domesticated New South evangelicalism, so a disruptive, prophetic folk religion is symbolized typically by jarring, often violent men. Theirs is not a soft piety grounded in home, mother, and an embracing Jesus, but rather one in which, as for Hazel Motes in lines already noted, Jesus appears as "a wild ragged figure," beckoning the folk believer "off into the dark" where, with ordinary categories disrupted, one could not be sure of one's footing. When, rarely, a folk believer seeks comfort and security in domesticated imagery, a prophetic word comes through to disrupt their sentimental longings. Near the end of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Tom T. Shiflet waxes nostalgic to try to escape his heightening sense of desolation. "It's nothing so sweet," he tells a poor boy hitchhiker he has picked up, "as a boy's mother. She taught him his first prayers at her knee…My mother was an angel of Gawd…He took her from heaven and giver to me and I left her." The poor boy responds violently, "You go to the devil!" and lunges out of the moving car, shocking Shiflet inadvertently into a genuine engagement with the Christianity he has been trying to avoid through sentimentalization.[38]

The ominous turnip-shaped cloud that subsequently chases Mr. Shiflet with "guffawing" thunder and "fantastic raindrops" is emblematic of another basic feature of folk religion: that Christian living is not about the upright manners of respectability and propriety, but instead involves passionate, even obsessive engagement with the most elemental forces in life: God and the Devil. In the Misfit's simple, stark folk theology, if "Jesus thown everything off balance," the only two options left are the utter self-giving devotion of faith, or finding perverse pleasure in wreaking violent havoc on others:

> If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him.[39]

[38] *Ibidem*, p. 155–156.

[39] *Ibidem*, p. 132.

O'Connor's folk believers battle with God and the Devil despite the cultured disdain of regional intellectuals like Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First" and Rayber in *The Violent Bear It Away*. When Rufus Johnson tells Sheppard that "Satan…has me in his power," Sheppard thinks to himself: "this boy's questions about life had been answered by signs nailed on pine trees: Does Satan have you in his power? Repent or burn in hell. Jesus saves." "Rubbish!" Sheppard fires back at Johnson, "we're living in the space age!"[40] As Sheppard is convinced that what Johnson needs is a healed foot, so Rayber is certain that Francis Marion Tarwater's troubles would be solved by constructive modern education and a caring father figure. Tarwater ultimately responds to Rayber's psychologizing with a darkly calculated act of sheer violence: he drowns Rayber's retarded son Bishop as Rayber watches helplessly from a distance. What Tarwater is acting out in dramatically violent ways is his inner struggle with the inescapable challenge voiced by the Misfit: utter faith or utter unbelief. Put differently, in his folk religious vision, the opposite of Christian living is not dissolute disorderliness, bad hygiene, and unrefined manners, but rather the stark negation of active, conscious violence and destruction.

In *The Violent Bear It Away* the folk religious Devil becomes an active character in the narrative, in a way that resembles Dostoevsky's *Demons* and the story of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The Devil says different things and takes different shapes for Francis Marion Tarwater, but beneath the differences the Devil is a force calling for repudiation of one's created givenness, urging acts of violent self-assertion and raw alienation. In "The Lame Shall Enter First" Rufus Johnson, though hauled off by the police, has the last word when the once-dismissive Sheppard realizes, to his horror, that in fact the Devil does have him in his power, that he has totally ignored his own son Norton in his quest to be a secular "Jesus Christ" to Johnson.[41] Manley Pointer in "Good Country People" debunks stock clichés about simple, pure country folk when, in the climactic scene, he symbolically rapes Hulga Hopewell by taking from her the one thing that made her feel vulnerable, her wooden leg. Though the PhD Hulga had believed philosophically that "some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see," it is the anti-folk believer Pointer who reveals what "nothing" tangibly looks like. He, not she, is ultimately the nihilist, acting out his own negating repudiation of the folk religion he encountered as a child "out in the country around Willohobie."[42] This seemingly-simple Bible salesman turns out to be an embodiment of the Devil.

O'Connor's two most-developed characters, Hazel Motes and Francis Marion Tarwater, wrestle with God and the Devil in very modern ways: they try to be radical nihilists by preaching a philosophy of nothingness and acting it out through murder. Both ultimately they fail to repudiate the folk religion of their youth. They return to it, and they signify their return in characteristically folk religious ways:

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[40] *Ibidem*, p. 450–451.

[41] *Ibidem*, p. 459, 481.

[42] *Ibidem*, p. 279.

by earthy, physical displays of sacred reality. Hazel Motes puts rocks in his shoes, blinds himself, and wraps barbed wire around his chest, spending his last days walking the city streets, while Francis Marion Tarwater, in the novel's climax, throws himself to the ground and pushes his face against the dirt of his great-uncle's grave until he hears a prophetic command, a divine word meant for him. He rises from the grave, smears a handful of dirt on his forehead, and makes his way to the "dark city" where he will seek to obey the prophetic claim on his life.[43] Folk religion, though seemingly furthest from Catholicism as O'Connor noted, has a pervasive physicality, an earthy sacramentalism.

Mason Tarwater displayed this earthy physicality in his own struggles of faith. From the small clearing that was Powderhead he would disappear into the surrounding woods, sometimes for days at a stretch,

> while he thrashed out his peace with the Lord, and when he returned, bedraggled and hungry, he would look…as if he had been wrestling a wildcat, as if his head were still full of the visions he had seen in its eyes, wheels of light and strange beasts with giant wings of fire and four heads turned to the four points of the universe.[44]

The folk healer Mrs. Greenleaf cuts stories of death, of murder, abuse, and rape from the newspapers, takes these into the woods, and buries them. She then lies over the ground and "mumbled and groaned for an hour or so moving her huge arms back and forth under her and out again and finally just lying down flat."[45] The folk preacher Bevel Summers insists that in the ritual of baptism, the river he stands in has become the "River of Life," for "this old red river don't end here. This old red suffering stream goes on, you people, slow to the Kingdom of Christ."[46] In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" the tent-show freak with a "country voice" insists to the reverent crowd that "You! You are God's temple, don't you know?," in the process giving genuine sacramental meaning to the girl's Catholic school joke about effective ways to protecting one's feminine "virtue."

Certainly the most vivid folk sacramental act is that of O.E. Parker, who for reasons he cannot really name, demands that the tattooist burn a huge, stern Byzantine Christ across his whole back. Parker originally wants to do this to spite his wife Sarah Ruth, to make her look at his body with sexual interest, but in the tattoo parlor, something about the image in the artist's book commands him, and he gazes at the Byzantine Christ's eyes while his heart beats "as if it were being brought to life by a subtle power." While Parker tries to sleep at night between sessions at the parlor, he is haunted by dreams of a burning tree, and he sees another "tree of light" when he returns to his house and Sarah Ruth. This return is not a reconciliation, though: a distanced Sarah Ruth berates him for wasting time and money, and then

[43] Idem, *The Violent Bear It Away*, New York 1960, p. 243.

[44] Idem, *Violent Bear It Away*, p. 8.

[45] Idem, *Complete Stories*, p. 316.

[46] *Ibidem*, p. 166.

rejects the image that is now on her husband's back. It is "idolatry," she screams, because "God is a spirit," and the body, and matter more generally, cannot ever actively convey the sacred. The rigidly-moral Sarah Ruth speaks from within the categories of the dominant evangelicalism, with its obsessive concern for cleanliness, good hygiene, and stiff, refined dress. In her showdown with her husband, it is ironically the rough, profane O.E. who comes to grasp the deepest meaning of the Incarnation. As Sarah Ruth beats his back with a broom, blood flows down the face of the tattooed Christ, completing its folk sacramental meaning and leading O.E. to weep in the yard beside a lone tree. Like the dirt on Tarwater's forehead or the rocks in Motes' shoes, Parker's tattoo becomes the earthy means through which he connects with Christian sacred reality—precisely the sacred reality that the dominant evangelicalism (though it would be puzzled to learn so) implicitly denies with its modern Docetism.

These characteristic features of folk religion—its earthy Protestant sacramentality, its emphasis on the perpetual struggle between God and the Devil in each believer, its abiding sense of Christianity as a disruptive and prophetic force, its demand of obsessive faith or rejection of faith—mark it as a regional form quite different the dominant evangelicalism of the region. In Troeltsch's categories, southern folk religion sustained the spirit of "sect," confronting its folk (and the larger society of which they were a basic part) with a transcendent, prophetic message. Various observers of the 20th century South have noted some of these elements of folk religion, but they have then dismissed any real power it might have had by crafting a psychological explanation of why impoverished southerners sustained a spirit of prophetic "sect." In *The Violent Bear It Away* O'Connor gives us a succinct illustration of this reductionism, of the modern urge to regard religion as "a department of sociology or culture or personality development." There the schoolteacher and amateur psychologist Rayber studies his uncle Mason Tarwater for some time, asking him all sorts of questions about his folk beliefs. Rayber then writes a scholarly article in which he argues that Tarwater's religion is simply the product of unfulfilled psychological and social need. "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." Tarwater sees this article and is infuriated.

> "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 myself to be struck down in my pride. Called myself to be torn by the Lord's eye."[47]

Tarwater (and through him, O'Connor) rejects the notion that "sect" type religion is mere psychological compensation. Why would anyone sign up for slander and persecution if psychological self-interest were their lone motive? Why, most

[47] Idem, *The Violent Bear It Away*, p. 19–20.

basically, would they submit to a religious message that challenged, not others, but themselves? Instead, O'Connor's fiction suggests, folk religion sustained a spirit of "sect" for cultural reasons: it held on to the basic stance of early evangelicalism. It was a "counterculture" in the New South and into the mid-20th century.

Robert Coles, Harvard psychiatrist and astute reader of O'Connor, found real-world manifestations of O'Connor's fictionalized folk religion in his fieldwork in impoverished areas of the South in the late 1950s and 1960s, particularly the Black Belt, Delta, and Appalachian regions.[48] He was personally moved by the religion he witnessed among black sharecroppers and white mountaineers and tenant farmers, and in a subsequent 1979 lecture series, he made the connection to O'Connor explicit. He called the people he encountered "her chosen ones—the South's impoverished, hard-praying, stubbornly enduring rural folk, of both races."[49] Importantly, Coles clarified something that was barely visible in O'Connor's fiction: that southern folk religion was a phenomenon that crossed the color line. All of the characteristic features noted above Coles found among poor whites *and* poor blacks. It was not just the religion of the region's "poor white trash," but rather of "the poor" in the broadest regional sense. Also importantly, Coles emphasized that the lives of the southern poor were changing rapidly—most basically, sharecroppers, tenants, and mountaineers were becoming extinct as mechanization transformed the South, dispersing the poor into the region's cities and out of the region altogether. In his lecture series Coles noted how O'Connor's "The Displaced Person" succinctly captured all of these sweeping regional changes. His fieldwork, then, is a vital document of folk religion before the "folk" disappeared.

Though other fieldworkers and folklorists have confirmed Coles' findings in their work with elderly people in the 1970s and 80s, the genealogy of folk religion remains unclear because its history had not been written. The present author's research reveals that regional folk religion was, as Coles argued, a cultural phenomenon among the poor of both races. It also shows that the folk religion O'Connor and Coles observed in the 1950s and 60s was a New South development, born of the late 19th century fusing of the early evangelical traditions of white plain folk and black slaves.[50] Folk religion was not "fundamentalist" in the strict sense (though O'Connor sometimes used that term colloquially). Fundamentalism was an urban, mainly non-southern movement that emphasized the Bible's literal interpretation and factual accuracy.[51] Folk believers lived, by contrast, in what O'Connor called "sacred history," with the Bible as a meta-narrative that mystically framed present-day life. Nor was folk religion embodied in "Holy Roller" (Holiness and Penteco-

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[48] R. Coles, *Migrants, Sharecroppers, Mountaineers*, Boston 1971.

[49] Idem, *Flannery O'Connor's South*, Athens: 1993 [1980], p. xxxi.

[50] For a historical narrative of folk religion, see J. Hayes, *Hard, Hard Religion: Folk and Poverty in the New South*, [forthcoming].

[51] G. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925*, New York 1980.

stal) churches. Their belief in the true Christian's perfection ("sanctification") was a striking contrast to folk religion's sense of perpetual struggle in the believer's soul and body. Holiness and Pentecostal churches were also peopled by those with some means—not the deeply impoverished.[52]

In a 1960 letter to a friend, O'Connor wrote of her folk prophet Mason Tarwater, "The old man is very obviously not a Southern Baptist, but an independent, a prophet in the true sense. The true prophet is inspired by the Holy Ghost, not necessarily by the dominant religion of his region."[53] The dominant religion of the region, of course, was the evangelicalism that had gained a position of cultural ascendancy by the early 20th century. It was embodied in "First" churches and centralized denominations, like the Southern Baptist Convention. Mason Tarwater didn't belong to a "First" church, and the centralized Convention would have dismissed him as an unlettered, uncouth would-be preacher in need of a good formal education and a good scrubbing. But Tarwater would very likely have belonged to a rural, or urban working-class, Baptist or Methodist church, as the folk believers that Coles witnessed often did. Tarwater, and real-world folk believers like him, could claim to be a more genuine Baptist than those of the Convention, for his folk religion had roots in early evangelicalism too. The significant point of difference is that he had stayed closer to the spirit of early, 18th century evangelicalism, than they had—his Christianity was still a disruptive counterculture, still a "sect."

In O'Connor's provocative regional analysis, then, it was folk evangelicals who kept the South "Christ-haunted" much more than respectable ones. Their folk religion spilled over safe compartmentalization, and became a disruptive, ever-unsettling message. Rather than blessing the *status quo*, it put everything, even folk believers themselves, under divine judgement. Folk religion's insistence on obsessive faith or equally obsessive repudiation of faith made Christianity a cultural force that few southerners could escape: one way or another, they had to come to terms with it. O'Connor's stories show how not just the passionate, but also the indifferent and the complacent, were "haunted" by the "fierce and instructive" ghost of Christianity. From the Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," to the boy Bevel in "The River," to the child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," to Hulga Hopewell in "Good Country People," to Mrs. May in "Greenleaf," to Norton in "The Lame Shall Enter First," the comfortable and the apathetic are shocked into decisive engagement with Christianity because they live in a Christ-haunted region, one that folk believers have helped to make. In each of these stories, a folk Christian, or someone that has actively repudiated folk religion, becomes the spark of dramatic change: the Misfit, Bevel Summers, Wendell and Cory, Manley Pointer, Mrs. Greenleaf, Rufus Johnson.

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[52] R. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South*, Cambridge 2008.

[53] Flannery O'Connor to William Sessions, September 13, 1960, [in:] *Collected Works*, ed. S. Fitzgerald, New York 1988, p. 1131.

An emblematic instance of this comes in the last pages of *Wise Blood*. Though baffled and dismissive, Mrs. Flood can't quite get her mind off Hazel Motes and the grotesque spectacle of faith that he displays. When the police recover his body at the novel's end, Mrs. Flood is transfixed by his empty eye sockets. She stares into his burned-out eyes, searching for something she can't name, and then paradoxically closes her eyes to stare further into his. But then something quite unexpected happens. She "felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light."[54] In his self-flagellation and desire to suffer, Motes becomes for Mrs. Flood a haunting, beckoning figure, like the wild ragged Jesus that had gotten into his own mind's eye as a boy. Like Hazel from his earliest boyhood, Mrs. Flood was now Jesus-bothered too.

But the possibility of this religious jolting across class lines was receding in the South of the 1940s-60s, for the simple reason that the "folk" of folk religion were disappearing. With the declining numbers of small farmers, tenants and sharecroppers, coal miners and other impoverished folk, with their exodus from the countryside and dispersal into the towns and cities of region and nation, went a significant regional religious form that had embodied a transcendent critique. O'Connor captured this vibrant religion better than any other regional observer, in the very mid-century years that it was fading away.

Still, even in the absence of the folk, self-satisfied Ruby Turpin, demanding an explanation from God back on the isolation of her farm, has the cultural possibility of a critical, challenging word of judgment. At the story's end, she sees a mystical vision of a heavenly parade—but the parade is moving in an order radically different from her own placing of people in the doctor's office. "Poor white trash" and "niggers" are at the front of the parade, marching into heaven first, while she, her husband, and other respectable types are bringing up the rear. She looks closer to make sense of the vision, and sees the respectable types, people of "good order and common sense and respectable behavior," singing in key like the refined, well-mannered sort they have always seemed to be. But looking even closer, she sees "their shocked and altered faces," and "that even their virtues were being burned away." The Christian ordering of reality, Mrs. Turpin is given to understand, is radically other than that of her hierarchical southern society. And yet this startling insight—through a subversive, mystical vision—is possible, paradoxically, because of the presence of Christianity in regional culture. Ruby Turpin wants to believe that Jesus made "everything the way it is," but ultimately, it is precisely her longing for higher, divine sanction that provides the imaginative space in which she can see herself judged. She wants Christianity to support her acute sense of social place, to be a pillar of a hierarchy in which she is near the top, yet in the end it is Christianity that upsets her complacency and puts her in her real place, at the back of the sacred parade.

[54] F. O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, p. 232.

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It was a similarly radical Christian reordering of Southern society that the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s was seeking, Martin Luther King argued in his 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail." A black evangelical, a Baptist minister raised in the New South city of Atlanta in the 1930s and 40s, King in his "Letter" envisioned substantive southern social change happening only with a heartfelt regional conversion experience. The public demonstrations, the sit-ins, boycotts, and marches, all ultimately had a basic goal: "to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which had constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue."[55] In the spring of 1963 that "community" was Birmingham, and "the issue" was the injustice and inhumanity of a racist social order. The created "crisis" and "tension" was not about bad publicity for the city, not about the power plays of politics, but rather went to the essential issue of a change of heart. The community, dominated by a "white power structure," needed to feel such moral/religious tension that it was provoked to change its basic character.[56] "Injustice must be exposed," King argued, "to the light of human conscience … before it can be cured."[57] This experience of tension, this making-visible of the injustice that was normally invisible, would disturb and disrupt the "privileged" who benefitted from "maintenance of the status quo," sparking their conscience and pushing them, from an inward beginning, to change the very social order in which they were sitting in top.

Understanding King's call for and method of social change requires a basic sense of how southern evangelicalism was related to another very powerful cultural message, that of racism. In the same New South era of evangelical ascendancy, a modern culture of white supremacy took shape: that of segregation, or Jim Crow. The obvious question is how the two could develop in the same era, in the same region. How was the Bible Belt South also the Jim Crow South?

Ruby Turpin spoke for what King called the "white power structure" when she classified the different people of the region by an explicit racial and class hierarchy. Respectable whites were above "poor white trash" and "niggers," she knew, but as she classified people by type while lying in bed at night, she thought of various qualifications: some respectable people had lost their money and were now poor, and some trashy people had acquired a fair amount of money, but no manners. And, most disturbingly, not all regional blacks were poor or unrespectable: "there were colored people who owned their own homes and land as well. There was a colored dentist in town who had two red Lincolns and a swimming pool and a farm."[58] Puzzled by such thoughts, Turpin would then fade into sleep.

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[55] M. Luther King Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, [in:] M. Luther King, *Why We Can't Wait*, New York 1964, p. 81.

[56] *Ibidem*, p. 79.

[57] *Ibidem*, p. 88.

[58] F. O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, p. 491.

Early evangelical churches had been countercultural, interracial spaces, but once white evangelicals began to actively differentiate themselves from black evangelical "brothers" and "sisters" in the early 19th century, they never really looked back. In the antebellum South leading white evangelicals became vocal defenders of slavery, and in the New South, they became active defenders of segregation. Like Ruby Turpin, they sought Christian sanction for the segregationist social order. If respectability, domesticity, and the Protestant work ethic were keys to their New South identity, they soon learned that categorically denying that black people could exhibit these traits was a highly effective way to support segregation and preserve one's Christian conscience too. If all black people, inherently by their unchangeable race, were trashy, profligate, immoral, lazy, and shiftless, then the code of white supremacy was not dehumanizing, but rather a natural organization based on the hierarchy of the superior over the inferior. Some white evangelicals might doubt this modern racism in their private moments, like Ruby Turpin. And some, like Georgia Methodist Lillian Smith, might openly repudiate the white evangelical affirmation of Jim Crow. But, as King noted, "individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture, but … groups tend to be more immoral than individuals."[59] At the end of the day, if they were bothered by pangs of conscience, most white evangelicals took the route of Ruby Turpin: they fell asleep and stopped worrying about it. They benefitted from racialized privilege, and their religion told them publicly that their privilege was not unjust oppression, but morally and religiously right. Thus their Bible Belt South went hand-in-glove with their Jim Crow South.

King hoped that the crisis created by Civil Rights activism would awaken the Christian conscience of white evangelicals, provoking their religious sense of self in critical judgment on their racial sense of self. "When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama," he wrote of the 1955 beginning of the movement, "I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers…would be among our strongest allies." He was acutely aware of the cultural power of regional evangelicalism:

> I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious-education buildings.

Clearly southern whites poured a lot of their wealth into their religion, clearly they seemed to tangibly be generously supportive of it. And yet, King went on to note, he quickly found that white churches, white ministers, and white Christians responded to black activism with both cautious indifference and outright opposition. When racist whites responded to movement activism with violent repression,

[59] M. Luther King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 82.

where were the white Christians? Of the imposing buildings he saw, King asked, "what kind of people worship here? Who is their God?...Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred?" Why did the tangible Christian generosity of white evangelicals stop at the white church? Why did the Christianity of white Alabamians give silent—or even vocal—sanction to their segregationist governor? King registered, three times for emphasis, his "deep disappointment" with white churches. "There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love," he noted of his position as an active evangelical and committed churchman. "Yes, I love the church," he emphasized. But "so often the contemporary [white] church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo."[60]

There can also be no deep disappointment where there is not deep expectation, and clearly King hoped that white evangelicals, despite their social comfortability and privilege, still had the religious resources—maybe pushed far away, to the margins and the subconscious—to respond to the crisis of Civil Rights with Christian conviction and religious principle. Their churches might take on the spirit of "sect" again, as they had back in the early days, challenging the *status quo* and casting a prophetic Christian light on the ordinary workings of segregationist society. As of April 1963 when he penned his "Letter," though, they had not.

They had not because, as O'Connor's fiction discerningly portrayed, the white evangelical goal of making evangelicalism a pillar of the New South social order had led, ironically, to its compartmentalization, to its safe defanging and declawing. King wrote:

> I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely otherworldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.[61]

From different social standpoints and with different goals, he and O'Connor were observing the same South and the same dominant religion. Evangelical ideals of respectability, domesticity, and the Protestant work ethic had certainly shaped the 20th century South, and yet the capacity to make a prophetic, transcendent critique had been dangerously compromised. Faced with the disruptive message of Civil Rights activism, white churches responded with a mixture of pietistic hollowness, Docetic retreat, and imaginative compartmentalization. Getting entangled in active social disturbance, shining the light of Christian judgment across all aspects of life, simply wasn't the church's business. Doing so would mean acting like an obsessive sect too worked-up about religion.

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[60] *Ibidem*, p. 93–95.

[61] *Ibidem*, p. 94–95.

White churches were only one player, of course, in King's drama of crisis. As his own background makes obvious, he was part of a different tradition—the tradition of black evangelicalism. In his own person, but also much more broadly through the behavior of thousands and thousands of people, black evangelicalism placed a distinct imprint upon the type of activism the Civil Rights movement displayed. Most basically, it showed "the more excellent way of love and non-violent protest." Black evangelicalism taught black activists a model of Christian non-retaliation, of meeting violence with non-violence, of following Jesus and "turning the other cheek." "I am grateful to God," King wrote in striking contrast to his lamentations for white churches, "that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle."[62]

"The Negro church" of the 1950s and 60s had a genealogy that overlapped with white evangelicalism in many ways, yet which also deviated at critical points. These critical points were a) the conversion of Africans and African Americans to Christianity of the evangelical type, over the course of a century, and b) the formation of distinct black denominations (almost entirely Baptist and Methodist) in the era of Reconstruction. It was the appearance of evangelicals in the late colonial South that first prompted major religious change in the slave and free black population. They began to convert, in increasing numbers into the 19th century, from the Islam or polytheism of their African backgrounds, to Baptist and Methodist Christianity. Some slaves became evangelical preachers and exhorters, and some free blacks in the region's few cities organized their own Baptist and Methodist congregations. When white evangelical leaders began to steer the movement from counterculture to accommodation and apology in the early 19th century, black evangelicals preserved their own sense of religion. In the slave quarters, in secret meetings at night, and in the urban congregations, they practiced an evangelicalism that deviated from the larger trajectory of the movement. This African-American religion fused basic evangelical teachings with cultural patterns of sub-Saharan Africa. In this fusion, the emphasis was much more communal than individual, and there was not a sharp line between "sacred" reality and "secular" world.[63] This distinct religious form flourished despite both its invisibility to some whites, and the actual attempts of others to prevent it and control the religious life of blacks. In the classic phrase of E. Franklin Frazier, African-American evangelicalism was an "invisible institution" in the antebellum South.[64] In the songs that slaves created it was sometimes heard, and in the revolts of Methodist class leader Denmark Vesey and Baptist preacher Nat Turner, its revolutionary possibility was felt and feared. But the power and scope of the invisible institution was much greater than these notable public manifestations.

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[62] *Ibidem*, p. 90–91.

[63] J. Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, New York 1972; L. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, New York 1977; A. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, New York 1978.

[64] E. F. Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, New York 1974.

One major consequence of emancipation was that the invisible institution became visible—in innumerable black Baptist and Methodist churches that the freedpeople built in the Reconstruction years. Paradoxically, as their institutional religious life became separate from that of whites, the major developments of black evangelicalism in the New South era paralleled those of their white counterparts. These were independent developments, not a matter of black imitations of white ideas, and yet in their New South transformations, African American evangelicalism became less African and more American. The distinctly African features—the communal ethos, and the interweaving of sacred and secular—were pushed to the margins as black evangelicals pursued the coalescing evangelical ideals of respectability, domesticity, and the Protestant work ethic.[65] The basic features of the thumbnail sketch of evangelical change in the New South/Bible Belt (pages 5–6) characterized both white and black evangelicals (though not folk believers of either race).

Yet there was a crucial difference as the "Negro church" became a visible institution. When black evangelicals embodied respectability, domesticity, and the Protestant work ethic, they were manifesting a visible, tangible critique of modern white supremacy. Their evangelical behavior openly challenged the dominant racism of the region. In striking contrast to white evangelicalism, black evangelicalism became an active, concrete critique of the racist *status quo*; their New South evangelical code offered not a justification for white supremacy, as it did for whites, but rather a living refutation of it. In this racial context, black evangelicalism, though emphasizing some of the same ideals as white evangelicalism, had the character of a prophetic "sect."[66] It disturbed and disrupted the *status quo*, visibly demonstrating that the way things were was not the way things should be. When black evangelicals in the Civil Rights movement openly disobeyed "unjust laws" for the sake of obeying a higher "just law," when they met white violence with concerted non-violence, they were living embodiments of a prophetic evangelicalism. Their sense of the sacred stood over and against the order of the world, in transcendent judgment on it. In a culture of evangelical respectability, their evangelical example sought to command respect, thereby dismantling the racist supports of the white power structure and inaugurating a new, more truly Christian, southern society. "We would present our very bodies," King argued, "as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community."[67]

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[65] E. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880––1920*, Cambridge 1993; P. Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era*, Chapel Hill 2005; P. Harvey, *Redeeming the South*; J. Giggie, *After Redemption.*

[66] D. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*, Chapel Hill 2004.

[67] M. Luther King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 80, 84–85.

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What happened? The Civil Rights challenge, informed quite visibly by black evangelicalism, stands as an obvious measuring rod of just how Christ-haunted the dominant white culture of the South really was. We know that folk Christianity was becoming an extinct form by the 1960s, with the disappearance and dispersal of the "folk." As a coherent bloc of impoverished, marginalized people, with interracial commonalities in their poverty, they were ceasing to exist. But what of the respectable, propertied white evangelicals who continued to thrive, who were criticized by their own historians in the 1960s for being "at ease in Zion," stuck in "cultural captivity"? Faced in their public square with the nonviolent direct action of Civil Rights activists, how did they respond? When they couldn't help but see non-retaliating black Christians in the city streets, did such Jesus-like behavior jar their Christian conscience, provoking a conversion experience about their own oppression and a subsequent reordering of the *status quo*?

Southern whites did not substantively experience the crisis of conscience that the movement, according to King, had sought to provoke. There was not a widespread regional conversion experience, not a new birth into a more truly Christian social order. Instead, the South of the post-60s era became both less race-conscious and less Christian. What emerged after the vital moment of the 1950s and 60s was a society that was both officially "colorblind" and more secularized. The dominant culture of the new Sunbelt South was not haunted, either by the ghost of Jim Crow, or by the ghost of Jesus Christ.

Walker Percy's 1961 novel *The Moviegoer*, though it is contemporaneous with O'Connor's later work and King's letter, succinctly captures the basic features of the emergent Sunbelt. It suggests why the region became less Christ-haunted, why the Civil Rights movement did not provoke a regional transformation of Christian conscience. The protagonist Binx Bolling is a stockbroker living in the New Orleans suburb of Gentilly. His culture is that of the Hollywood movies he regularly attends, and of making money and finding great pleasure in it. He tells the reader near the beginning of the story:

My wallet is full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards. Last year I purchased a flat olive-drab strongbox, very smooth and heavily built with double walls for fire protection, in which I placed my birth certificate, college diploma, honorable discharge, G.I. insurance, a few stock certificates, and my inheritance… It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist. What satisfaction I take in appearing the first day to get my auto tag and brake sticker! I subscribe to *Consumer Reports* and as a consequence I own a first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant. My armpits never stink…Yesterday a favorite of mine, William Holden, delivered a radio announcement on litterbugs. "Let's face it," said Holden. "Nobody can do any-

thing about it—but you and me." This is true. I have been careful ever since.[68] As the passage makes clear, Binx Bolling embodies some of the basic ideal behaviors that evangelicals codified in the making of the Bible Belt: he has good hygiene, he cares about clean streets, he is a responsible and upright citizen, and he has a solid work ethic. And yet the framework in which these behaviors make sense has shifted notably. The overarching culture in which they have meaning is not that of evangelical Christianity, but rather one of money-making and movie-going. O'Connor in a 1963 lecture had noted how "it becomes more and more difficult in America to make belief believable," how a theologically informed writer like herself struggled to craft religiously-obsessed characters that seemed credible, because the dominant national culture was shaped most basically by the twin poles of "Hollywood or Madison Avenue."[69] Binx Bolling's conscious identity is definitively shaped by the culture of these twin poles—and, one might add, also by that centered in Washington, D.C. He is a citizen, a moviegoer, and a money-maker/consumer. He lives in the Sunbelt South.

This new regional society was emerging in the very years that O'Connor was writing, though the phrase "Sunbelt" was not coined until the end of the 1960s. Through federal government programs beginning in the 1930s, increasing with mass militarization in the 1940s, outside capital was infused into the region, fostering a massive shift from agriculture to industry and service work, from impoverished national backwater to booming site of rapid development, from relative cultural isolation to full incorporation into the currents of national culture. The regional population that Ruby Turpin had carefully categorized was being altered altogether: blacks, both propertied and poor, were leaving the South in a cresting wave, and so were impoverished whites. Meanwhile, many from outside the region began to make their way in, finding it a pleasant climate and promising place of development. With new money in their pockets and a newly-felt purchasing power, many denizens of this emergent Sunbelt became eager consumers. Through this process of capital redistribution and newfound consumption, Washington, D.C., Hollywood, and Madison Avenue came to be powerful players in the lives of southerners, as they did for Binx Bolling.

Binx's life in the new suburb of Gentilly is also emblematic of the basic shape that Sunbelt development took in the critical factor of residential place, of where Sunbelt southerners made their homes. They moved from the New South countryside and towns and cities, to the new, quickly-sprouting suburbs. Binx describes the appeal that living in Gentilly has for him:

> Except for banana plants in the patios and the curlicues of iron on the Walgreen drugstore one would never guess it was part of New Orleans. Most of the houses are either old-style California bungalows or new-style Daytona cottages. But this is what I like about it. I can't stand the old-world atmosphere of the French Quarter or the genteel charm of the Garden District.[70]

[68] W. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, New York 1961, p. 4.

[69] F. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, p. 200–201.

[70] W. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, p. 3.

Suburban life allows Binx to escape the ghost of history. But there is a danger in this escape. Binx fears that he could be "an anyone who is anywhere," that he could slip "clean out of space and time," that without the grounding of the past, he could lose identity altogether.[71] The narratives of Hollywood movies, the tangible pursuit of money, and U.S. nationalism give Binx the identity he fears he may lose. They give him "certification."[72]

Thus, though Binx is living in the South, though he is descended from a long line of southerners and is well-aware of his family's history, there is nothing distinctly regional in his conscious identity. He is not "an anyone who is anywhere," but there is a subconscious anomie in his life, one that Gentilly tangibly represents. The basic action of the novel begins when this anomie becomes conscious one morning, when Binx wakes up and is strangely puzzled by his own identity, by the sheer fact of existence. So begins what he calls his "search." It is a search for a more substantive identity, for meaning and a sense of true place. That a character in the South could be imagined as feeling a need for these things suggests, of course, just how radically the region was being transformed. Place, meaning, and identity were not clear in the Sunbelt South. One might get them from outside the region, or one might feel a need to search for deeper and more substantive sources. If O'Connor's fiction and King's letter were very much grounded in an older South where place and meaning were informed by a distinct regional culture, Percy's novel points to the future of uncertain cultural messages. In this new Sunbelt of amnesia, atomization, and anomie, the old ghosts of southern history—the ghosts of religion and race—seem to have vanished. The Sunbelt South was "a world open and clean."[73]

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[71] *Ibidem*, p. 64, 167.

[72] *Ibidem*, p. 53.

[73] Idem, *The Last Gentleman*, New York 1966, frontispiece [quoting R. Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*]. Arguing that the dominant culture of the Sunbelt South is both colorblind and secular is not at all to suggest that racism or religion has disappeared. Clearly, neither has. Politicized evangelicalism, or the "Religious Right," has been a subject of scholarly analysis for thirty years now, with new works of analysis appearing with increasing frequency. The rise of Neo-Evangelicalism, most visibly associated with southerner Billy Graham, has also been an object of analysis for some time, and continues to be. "The black church" as an idea continues to exert power, and works by scholars in a variety of disciplines continue to explore how black churches have shaped African-American life in the South and the U.S. since the 1960s. The ethos informing the corporate giant Wal-Mart is distinctly evangelical Christian, and many outsiders to the region are still struck by visible displays of religion in the southern public square (though, many other scholars note, those displays are increasingly pluralistic and not solely evangelical Christian). Though all of these things are real, this essay argues that the dominant culture has shifted notably since the mid-20th century. No longer are Southerners of all categories "afraid" that they "may have been formed in the image and likeness of God." No longer is the "ghost" of Christianity "haunting" the region as a whole. Hazel Motes may have been believable in the South of the 1950s and 60s, but today many in the region would be utterly baffled by such a person—not just disrupted and made uncomfortable. As Rayber did for Mason Tarwater, they would likely exorcise Motes' ghosts with psychological theories of an unhealthy upbringing, and ideas of symbolic religious compensation for social lack: they would cancel out a theological sense of life and replace it with one entirely human and social.