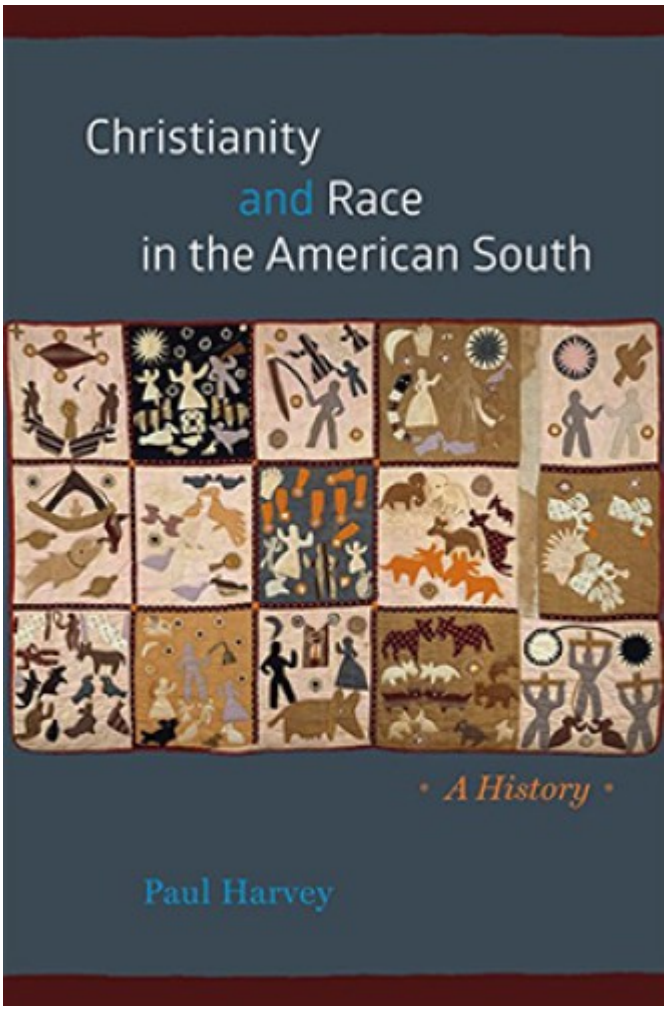
The complex story of race and religion in the American South

Paul Harvey's history shows how things could have gone very differently.

by Anne Blue Wills in the February 28, 2018 issue

In Review



Christianity and Race in the American South

A History

By Paul Harvey
University of Chicago Press

In this timely and readable history, Paul Harvey ably interprets the pervasive ironies of the American South: a place where faith-drenched Christians defended slavery and impoverished prophets arose alongside an economically burgeoning New South. In taking note of these paradoxes, Harvey has produced a thought-provoking historical account of religion and race that's brief enough for lay audiences to read and, perhaps more importantly, talk about. His comprehensive lens focuses on eras and regions that other histories of race and religion have neglected.

Race and religion, Harvey argues, have helped "to define each other." Only when we understand the historical lineaments of that defining process can we address the systemic oppression behind such recent events as the callous federal response to the New Orleans flood after Katrina and the racist viciousness that produced the Emanuel A.M.E. Church massacre.

Harvey, a historian who teaches at the University of Colorado, is a skilled narrator and a trustworthy guide. He has already written extensively on the relationship between race and religion in *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity* (2011) and *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (2005). Here he distills his deep knowledge of southern religion into eight manageable chapters marked by moments in U.S. history, starting before the American Revolution and running up to the present.

Harvey narrates the "fundamentally religious" nature of racial categories. Colonial religious authorities in Virginia and South Carolina created and enforced standards of piety that upheld white European civilization as the paradigm. As these Anglicans catechized and baptized enslaved black people, they imposed hedges (such as missionary Francis Le Jau's prebaptismal pledge) against claims to (or even a recognition of) the slaves' social equality with white Anglicans.

By contrast, 18th- and 19th-century white evangelicals, with their revival-fueled enthusiasm, clashed with the Anglican planter class. Through an alluring alchemy of "unleash[ing] and control[ling] the spirit," evangelicalism became the religious mode of southern slaveholding and produced the "basic dialectic of southern history," which Harvey describes as "cultural creativity and political subordination."

Southern evangelicals, allied with the revolutionaries of the late 18th century, became 19th-century conservatives who defended the slave system. White southern evangelicals' modes of social control rode atop and fed on religious and cultural impulses that had their own integral logic and strategies of resistance.

Harvey puts "musical visionaries" at the center of the distinctively southern culture of sacred and secular music and folk theology. He may give that mixture too much credit for reaching beyond "its origins to touch all human grappling with questions of meaning and the individual's place in community." Rhythm and blues and rock music supply Harvey with the most persuasive examples of this reach beyond the South. It seems true that figures such as Johnny Cash had broad circulation, but circulation does not necessarily mean penetration. Consumers of these performances were in many cases just that: they consumed the commodity of southern culture and found it exotic, curious, and quaint—but not particularly transformative. Howard Finster's paintings hang on gallery walls and in stylish homes without their owners necessarily embracing Finster's apocalyptic hope.

As useful as this book is for laypeople, specialists too will benefit from it. Harvey argues that the South's development as a region dependent on forced labor and then saddled with the legacy of race-patriarchy was not an inevitability. He does not dabble in counterfactuals. He shows how colonial Anglican power interests and the white "focus on self-defense by whatever means necessary" were revised in the face of religio-cultural challenge.

Furthermore, he shows that the pre-Revolutionary South contained communities of Native Americans, French and Spanish Catholics, enslaved Africans (some of them Muslim), mid-Atlantic Anglicans, New England Dissenters, Quakers, and Rationalists. Although these groups were not necessarily living in peaceful coexistence, they were at least grappling with one another's claims. And in our contemporary moment, conservative, moderate, and progressive Jews, Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Bahá'ís, and the secular are self-conscious voices in the public square, hashing out their relations with each other. Evangelical hegemony, he argues, is an exception to the rule of a globalized South and multivocal public debate.

Harvey's arguments for the contingency of the present-day South reveal some of his intellectual and political motives. While theologians may appeal to Providence to explain the world, historians cannot. Harvey shows how many possible outcomes existed for southern culture, economics, and religious life. Such a claim may not

seem so revolutionary. Yet, with varying degrees of fervor and self-awareness, Americans tend to insist upon the inevitability of their history and their standing among the nations of the earth. Readers who come away from the book with a tighter grasp on the complexities of race and religion in the South may also be able to loosen their grasp on the myth of American inevitability. Further revisions of historical narrative may grow from Harvey’s intervention.