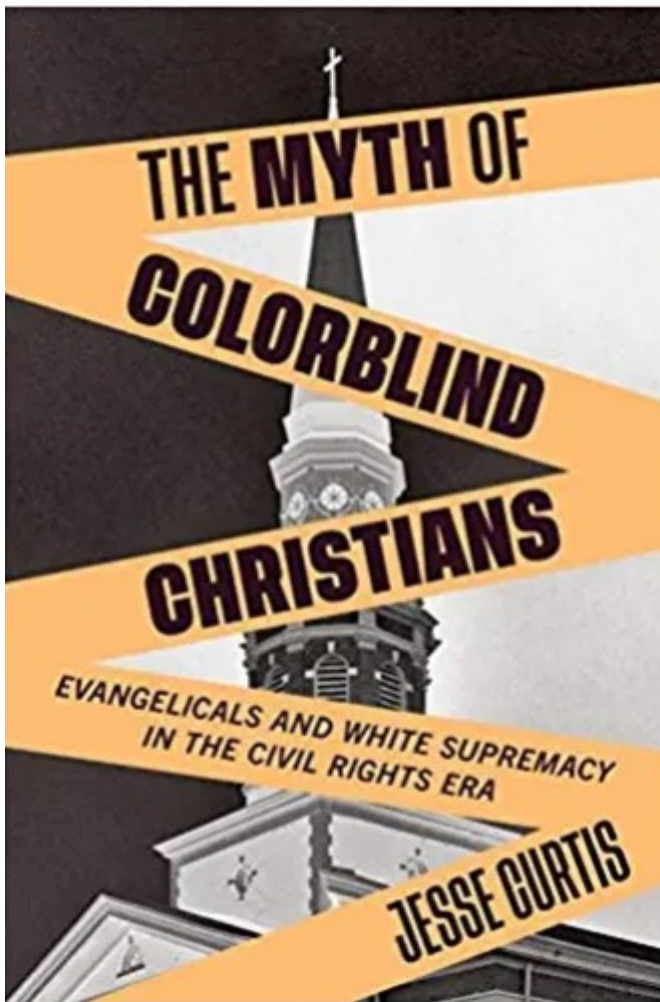


Take & Read: New titles in American religious history

selected by [William J. Schultz](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue

In Review



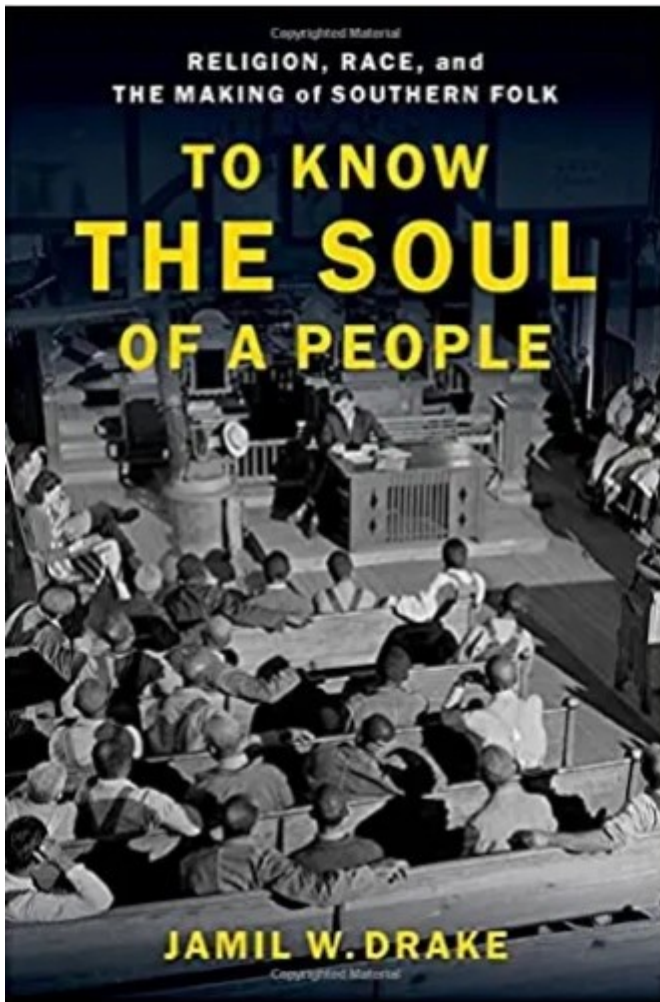
Myth of Colorblind Christians

Evangelicals and White Supremacy in the Civil Rights Era

By Jesse Curtis

New York University Press

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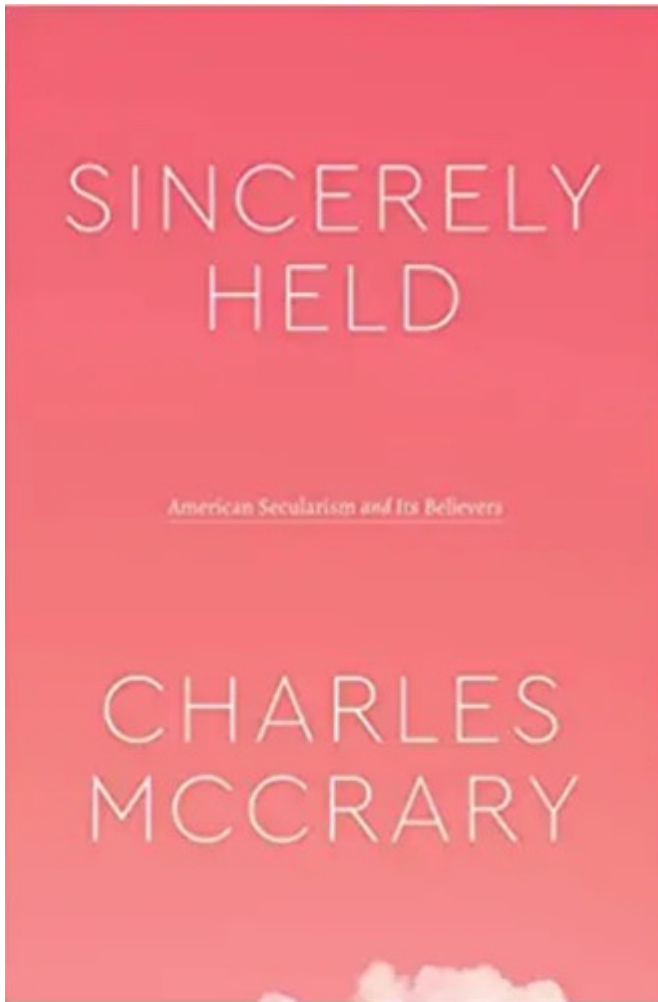
To Know the Soul of a People

Religion, Race, and the Making of Southern Folk

By Jamil Drake

Oxford University Press

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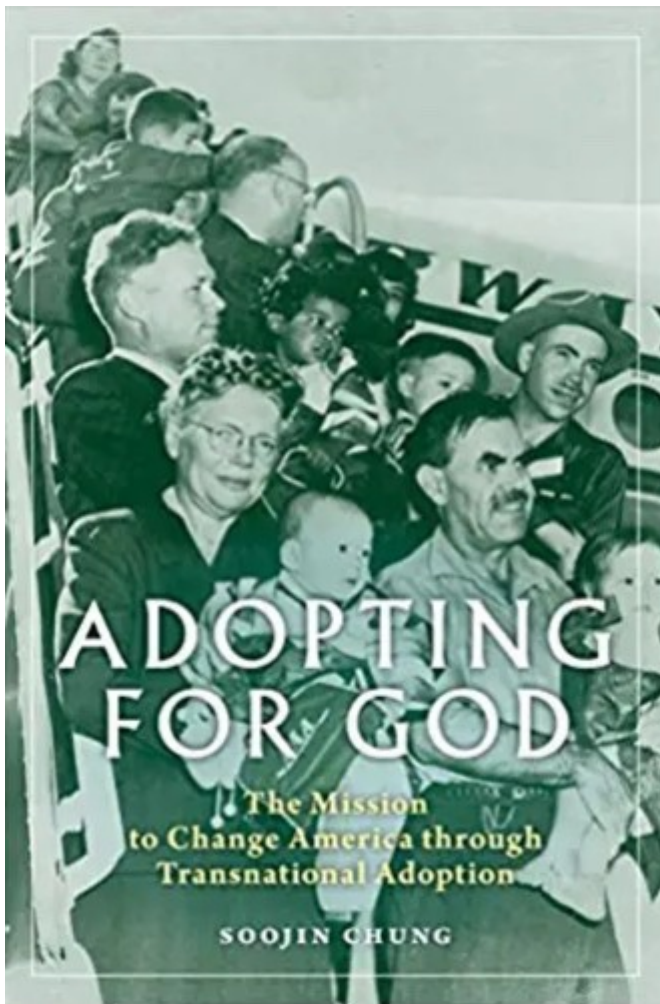
Sincerely Held

American Secularism and Its Believers

By Charles McCrary

University of Chicago Press

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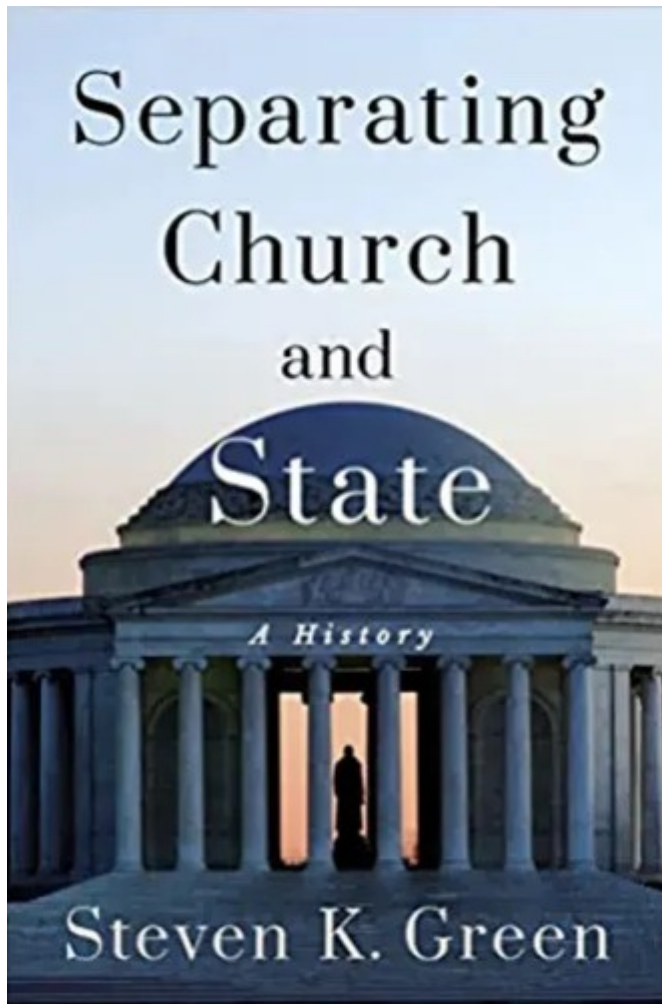
Adopting for God

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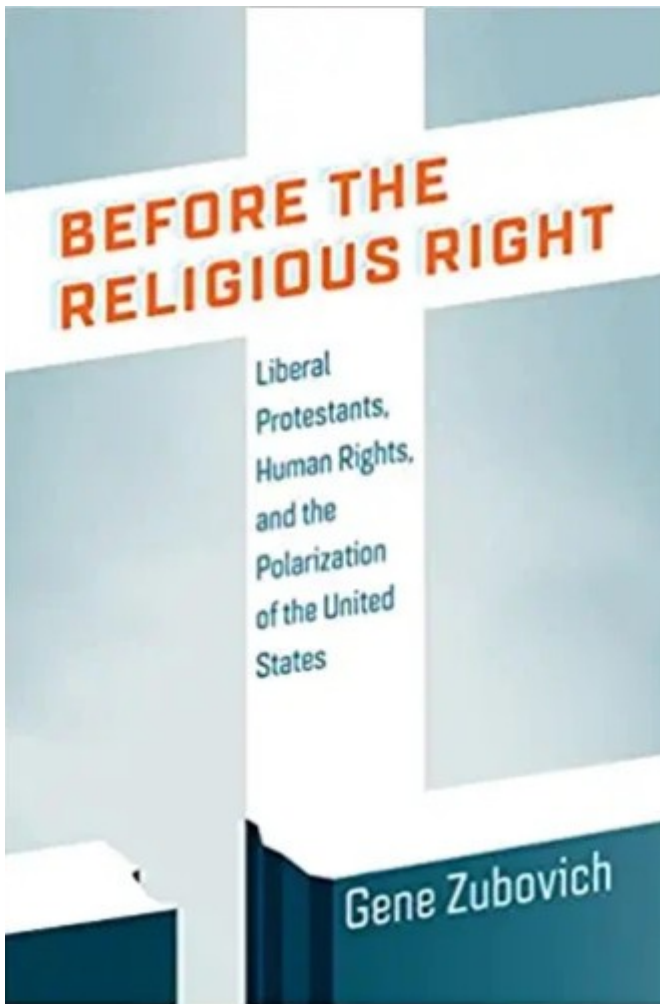
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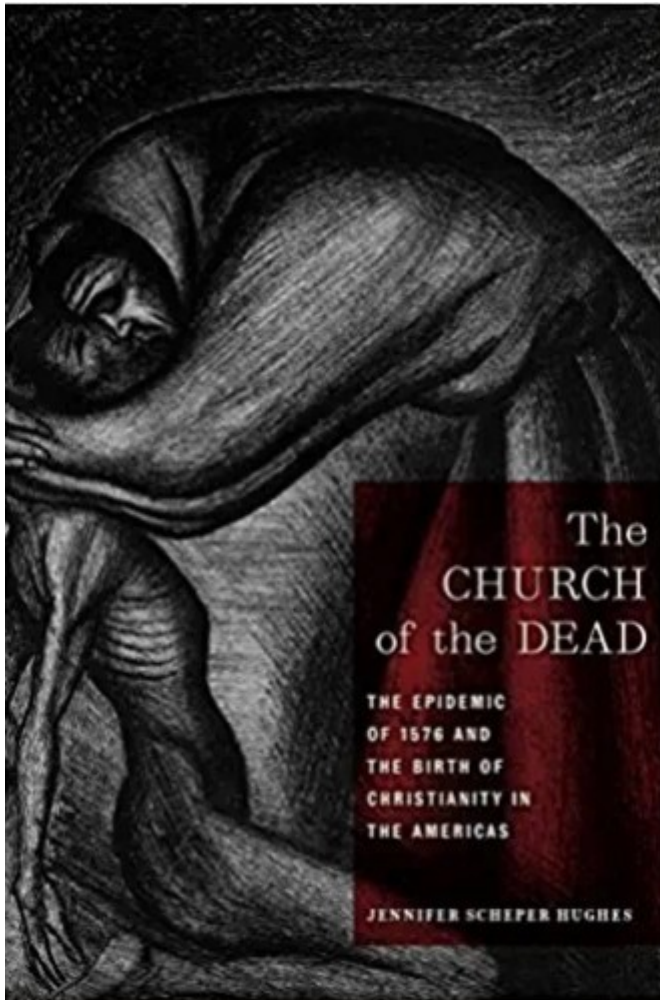
Before the Religious Right

Liberal Protestants, Human Rights, and the Polarization of the United States

By Gene Zubovich

University of Pennsylvania Press

[Buy from Bookshop.org >](https://www.bookshop.org/books/before-the-religious-right-liberal-protestants-human-rights-and-the-polarization-of-the-united-states/9780812249444)



The Church of the Dead

The Epidemic of 1576 and the Birth of Christianity in the Americas

By Jennifer Schepher Hughes

New York University Press

[Buy from Bookshop.org](http://www.bookshop.org) >

The Myth of Colorblind Christians: Evangelicals and White Supremacy in the Civil Rights Era

By Jesse Curtis

New York University Press

Jesse Curtis, a historian at Valparaiso University, explores how White evangelical Christians gradually abandoned segregationist theologies in favor of a “gospel of colorblindness” that, while not explicitly racist, often left racist systems

unchallenged. Curtis eschews the world of formal politics and shows how the evangelical gospel of colorblindness was forged in more private spaces: homes, schools, and churches. Particularly interesting is his discussion of how the church growth movement emerged from the context of the civil rights movement. CGM advocates like Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner insisted that racially homogeneous congregations were not racist but rather reflected the human desire to be with “our kind of people” (as Wagner titled one of his books). Though not polemical, Curtis shows in painful detail how White evangelicals, when given the choice between confronting racism and ignoring it in the name of church unity, almost always chose the latter.

To Know the Soul of a People: Religion, Race, and the Making of Southern Folk

By Jamil Drake

Oxford University Press

One of the most vibrant fields of American religious history is the history of those who study American religion. Jamil Drake, a religious studies scholar at Florida State University, makes an important contribution to this literature with this book, which examines how liberal social scientists studied and interpreted (and, indeed, often misinterpreted) the religion of southern Black people. These social scientists rejected racist stereotypes about Black people and often advocated for reforming the South’s racial caste system. But, as Drake shows, their depictions of Black religion as emotional and primitive, along with their claims that this “otherworldly” faith hampered the process of modernization, refurbished older stereotypes with a social scientific gloss. Drake argues convincingly that contemporary debates over “cultures of poverty” have deep religious roots.

Sincerely Held: American Secularism and Its Believers

By Charles McCrary

University of Chicago Press

What does it mean to believe something? In this difficult yet rewarding book, Charles McCrary of Arizona State University examines how Americans—especially judges, lawyers, and academics—have tried to answer this question. Invoking an eclectic

cast of characters which includes Herman Melville, Paul Tillich, 19th-century fortune tellers, and 20th-century pacifists, McCrary argues that the American legal system has impoverished our idea of religion by equating religion with “sincerely held belief.” In so doing, it has stripped religion of its communal elements. As he eloquently writes: “The sincerity test is supposed to put everyone on equal footing under the law, but it also makes them stand alone.” This is an essential text for understanding the current struggles over religious freedom.

Adopting for God: The Mission to Change America through Transnational Adoption

By Soojin Chung

New York University Press

Soojin Chung of Azusa Pacific University has made a significant contribution to a growing body of literature on the global connections of American Christianity. (See also Helen Jin Kim’s excellent *Race for Revival*, reviewed in the century’s June 29 issue). *Adopting for God* deals with American Christians—of both evangelical and ecumenical persuasions—who urged their fellow Americans to open their hearts and homes to non-White adoptees, especially children from war-torn Korea. Though Chung does not ignore the somber aspects of this story (for instance, the way in which depictions of Asian children as “ideal adoptees” reinforced the myth of the model minority) she nonetheless makes a convincing case that this transnational adoption movement was not simply “unmitigated cultural imperialism.” Adoption evangelists like Pearl Buck and Bertha and Harry Holt challenged, and to some degree undermined, the dominance of White supremacy in the United States, making possible a vision of a more equitable and multicultural society.

Separating Church and State: A History

By Steven K. Green

Cornell University Press

Building on his earlier scholarship on church-state relations in the United States, Steven K. Green of Willamette University provides a magisterial history of the concept of separation of church and state. Green challenges scholars who have argued that separationism is a modern invention. Beginning his story in the colonial

era and bringing it into the present, he shows that Americans of all political and religious stripes have invoked separation as a key principle in church-state relations. But, as Green notes, they have often differed about what separationism means and what it should accomplish. Is it about protecting churches from the government? About promoting individual freedom of conscience? About promoting religious pluralism? This flexibility has given separationism its strength—but it has also left the concept vulnerable to concerted attacks, like the Supreme Court’s recent efforts to redraw the boundaries between church and state in a way distinctly favorable to the former.

Before the Religious Right: Liberal Protestants, Human Rights, and the Polarization of the United States

By Gene Zubovich

University of Pennsylvania Press

Epic is a word rarely used in the same sentence as “ecumenical Protestantism,” but Gene Zubovich, a historian at SUNY-Buffalo, has written a truly epic account of how ecumenical Protestantism transformed American politics between the 1920s and 1970s. Zubovich describes how Protestants affiliated with the National Council of Churches fought to create a world order that would protect the rights and dignity of all human beings. These Protestants, many of whom held lofty positions in politics, law, and academia, were equally active in domestic affairs, fighting against segregation and in favor of a more equitable economy. As Zubovich shows, however, ecumenical mobilization generated a backlash among more conservative laity, helping to spur the rise of the Christian right. Ecumenical Protestants sought to make America more just and more equal. They succeeded, at least to a degree, but their work left the nation more polarized as well.

The Church of the Dead: The Epidemic of 1576 and the Birth of Christianity in the Americas

By Jennifer Scheper Hughes

New York University Press

“Why should we not begin with Tenochtitlan rather than Plymouth Rock as the starting place for thinking about the origins of North American Christianity?” So asks

Jennifer Scheper Hughes, a professor at the University of California–Riverside, in her examination of—and meditation upon—the mysterious *cocoliztli* epidemic which swept through the Americas from 1576 into the early 1580s, killing millions of Indigenous people. Through a careful reading of both colonial and Indigenous sources, Hughes argues that this epidemic, for all the devastation it wrought upon Indigenous communities, nonetheless gave those same communities an opportunity to reassert their presence in the wake of the disaster. Mexican Christianity, she concludes, “is not primarily the creation of Spanish missionaries, but rather of indigenous Catholic survivors” of the epidemic. This powerful book reorients American Christianity in time and space, grounding it firmly in the history of Indigenous peoples.