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Religious Studies 490-001

2 May 2002

Success Found in Defeat

Charles Reagan Wilson's Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920 was greeted upon its release in 1980 with praise for breaking "new ground in Reconstruction and New South history" (Jones 263). The work has been called a sensible and not condemnatory interpretation of southern post-Civil War mythmaking based on the observation that "Southerners cannot escape their history," and neither pacified nor at peace "did not really want to" (Jeansonne 2205). The subject matter was indeed familiar, but Wilson adopted a new approach to deciphering how Southerners, despite failing in their attempt to establish a separate political identity, managed to achieve "the dream of a separate cultural identity." He admittedly relied upon sociologist Robert N. Bellah's influential 1967 article "Civil Religion in America," in order to present his own "relatively new and untested concept" of the existence of a dual civil religion, an American and Southern version (Jones 263). He proposed that it was the existence of this Southern civil religion that allowed Southerners to cope with "apparent defeat" (Wilson 73) and in seeking reconciliation and vindication, "link a sense of Southern destiny with the Northern sense of American mission" (Jones 263).

Wilson revealed that a "blend of evangelical Protestant religion emerged" to meet the "profound concerns of postwar Southerners" (Jones 264). They understood that the outcome of the Civil War had "clearly given them a history distinct from that of the

North” (Wilson 13). By creating a romantic myth of the Lost Cause, much like the “creation of an independent Highland tradition” in Scotland (Trevor-Roper 16), the Southerners successfully separated themselves from the “forces of evil, as symbolized by the Yankee” (Wilson 24). The “search for identity and the resolution of that quest in a myth,” allowed the inherently suspicious people of Dixie the opportunity to avoid the increasing influence of the materialism and industrialism of the North. The “colorful tales and romantic examples” (Wilson 114) of the myth were expressed through an “interrelationship of history, culture, and religion” that preserved the “righteousness of the cause, gave strength, order, stability, and inspiration to a defeated but unbowed South” (Jeansonne 2205). Certainly there was no denying the failure of the Southern independence movement, but instead of being meaningless, the “Confederate loss would lead Southerners to stronger religious faith” (Wilson 60) and on communal occasions, “the participants seemed to believe that a holy Confederate spirit descended and touched those present” (Wilson 22).

By paying homage to a holy cause and mythologizing the past, Southerners provided an institutionalized “means of symbolically overcoming their history,” (Jones 264) and reframing historical events as part of a divine plan and destiny almost of their own making, due to what historians have described as a “failure of the will to win” (Wilson 5). However, there existed only a thin line between Southern history and Southern mythology. Mythology aided in the recovery from “serious postwar psychological and cultural problems and embodied its own truths;” though, Southerners also required a “critical examination of the past to meet other needs” (Wilson 159). Generalized rhetorical techniques were effectively used to communicate the ideas and

ideals of a cohesive Southern people by carefully choosing and borrowing quite liberally from the Protestant tradition, making a religion out of the past, since their dreams of “a gospel guarded against the contamination of New England infidelity” had been shattered (Wilson 22). Stress was placed upon a “hopefulness and a confidence in the future,” yet all eyes remained focused on the past (Wilson 96).

In the minds of Southern ministers, the past stretched back to ancient Israel, and employing the “glorious legacy for their own needs,” (Wilson 11) they compared Southerners to the chosen people, “peculiarly blessed by God” (Wilson 7). Religious leaders took it upon themselves to continue the “wartime military-political battle for virtue on a new level,” (Wilson 8) by creating the “Lost Cause civil religion” and its Crusading Christian Confederates (Wilson 9). The myth of the crusaders enabled the clergy to assert that the Confederacy’s values had survived the war and were providing a “stable basis for Southern society” (Wilson 38). With a predominant “insider” (Said 322) perspective, the real issue was whether there could be a true representation of the South, or whether “any and all representations,” because they were such, were “embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer” (Said 272).

If the American civil religion was not considered negative, then why was a “functioning civil religion not dedicated to honoring the American nation” considered to be dangerous (Wilson 30)? Due to its birth in Confederate defeat, the highly ritualized Southern civil religion with its “references to Christ and the Holy Ghost” (Wilson 33) only sought to offer “confused and suffering Southerners a sense of meaning, an identity in a precarious but distinct culture” (Wilson 13) and a “way for the community to help its

citizens meet their individual fears of death” (Wilson 29). For Southerners, the “need for such a symbolic life was even greater than for Northerners,” (Wilson 30) because they perceived themselves as a “people without a country” (Wilson 73) and the “victims of a fallen cause” (Wilson 61). The Union had sacrificed, as well, but “at least the success of their cause seemed to validate their deaths” (Wilson 30).

The Confederate veteran was a “living incarnation of an idea that Southerners tried to defend at the cultural level, even after Confederate defeat had made political success impossible” (Wilson 36). In “doubtful history but revealing rhetoric,” the typical Confederate soldier was depicted as one of the “forces of the world” (Wilson 165). The makers of the myth taught that Southerners fought not “for fame or for reward,’ nor ‘for place or for rank’; instead, they campaigned ‘in simple obedience to duty’” (Wilson 41-2) as part of the most holy army in the world’s history. Unlike his Yankee counterpart, he was “thoroughly imbued with moral principle,” and his behavior in an honest struggle resulted from “his native intelligence, superior education, and, above all, from his being a gentleman” (Wilson 54).

In the constant reliving and confronting of the “death of the Confederacy,” (Wilson 36) Southerners desired to “purify their heroes of any stain, especially in the crucial area of religion” (Wilson 23). Wartime heroes, including soldiers and political leaders, were easily portrayed as “religious saints and martyrs” and were said to “epitomize the best of Christian and Southern values” (Wilson 25). Acknowledging that their heroes “would have been great without religion,” the preachers and “prophets of the Lost Cause,” (Wilson 79) hoping to reinforce the need for religion in times of “affliction, suffering, trial, and humiliation,” (Wilson 72) insisted that faith made these men “purer,

stronger, more courageous, more efficient” (Wilson 23). Their devotion to principle was a “legacy that could inspire generations of Southerners to nobility” (Wilson 75).

After converting the “dead heroes into revered ancestors,” (Wilson 29) the meaning of Southern defeat in the War had to be addressed and the conclusion drawn that “despite defeat, the Confederate experience proved them a noble, virtuous people” (Wilson 28). The understanding of defeat as the “discipline which trains the truly heroic soul to further and better endeavors” (Wilson 23) seemed to sustain Southerners living “with their tragic sense of life” (Wilson 36). They were fiercely protective of the myth centering on the Confederate soldier and resisted calling the war a lost cause, because it was comforting to believe those “who fought in response ‘to *that* battle call,’ of conscience, could never die in vain” (Wilson 42).

The Confederate’s wartime adversary represented the “monster against which heroes must always contend” (Wilson 40). Southerners characterized the Northerners as ““infidels, Mercenary Vandals, Scum of the Earth”” (Wilson 149). For the ministers of the Lost Cause, the Yankee also symbolized a “chaotic, unrestrained Northern society that had threatened the pristine, orderly, godly Southern civilization” (Wilson 40). In linking the present struggle with “the war between the Northern and Southern kings recorded in the book of Daniel,” the abiding flaws of the Northern kings’ were “vanity and lack of submission to God, traits which seemed to describe the Yankee perfectly” (Wilson 64). Both Northerners and Southerners were the “descendants of noble ancestors” (Wilson 80) based upon “the common heritage of all Americans,” (Wilson 181) but if the Confederate were to play the role of the hero, then the only role left to the Yankee was that of the villain (Wilson 80).

The South satisfied the definition of a nation as a “historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture,” but these political spheres known as nations differed in “their conditions of life,” and in “spiritual complexion, which manifests itself in peculiarities of national culture” (Stalin 20). The “persistent Bible Belt image” suggested that the South had long been “regarded as a sacred society,” (Wilson 15) and an attitude of “moral and spiritual superiority” (Wilson 98) helped to “wed Southern churches to Southern culture” (Wilson 7). The reality of the culture’s “alleged sacredness was less important than the Southerner’s conviction that his regional values and cultural symbols were holy” (Wilson 15). After all, communities were distinguished by the “style in which they are imagined,” not by their falsity or genuineness (Anderson 6). The Southland was sacred to its citizens because they “saw a sacred quality in it” (Wilson 15). Most importantly, these sacred qualities and traditions, real or imagined, were not to be tampered with even by well-intentioned citizens.

The word Protestant could be viewed to have an interesting role in forming the popular concept of a “Southern Way of Life” (Wilson 12). Protestant denoted a member or adherent of any denomination of the Western Christian church that rejected papal authority and some fundamental Roman Catholic doctrines and believed in justification by faith. The root word was obviously protest, and with that familiar legacy of fighting for a purified church, the South endeavored to fight for a purified society by rebelling against their minority status, a quintessentially American value dating back to the virtuous American Revolution almost one hundred years earlier. Some Confederates became indignant at the Northern use of the word “rebellion” to describe the Confederate

effort beginning in the 1890s (Wilson 125); though, they came to appreciate the rebel image of a people who were “only overcome and not subdued,” (Wilson 149) their rebel institutions, and rebel yell and embraced the figure of Johnny Reb as the perfect way to describe their lingering patriotism or nationalism (Wilson 125).

The war was one of “conscience against conscience—a conflict of moral ideals,” with the perverted conscience of the North resulting in “injustice toward the South.” The Confederates were to be commended because they “fought a war of principle, a war whose lesson was that one should follow conscience despite the risks of defeat” (Wilson 41). All of Southern society, as well as its individual soldiers, were to be cleansed and their faith renewed with “each baptism of blood in combatting evil” (Wilson 97). In keeping with the religious imagery, the South believed that it was waging a battle “against the powers of darkness” for its very soul (Wilson 44). The region came to represent an innocent, vulnerable woman who required protection from the rape and ruin of the Yankee invader, but God’s blessing would be integrity, not prosperity, and the Confederates came to possess it. The resulting “Confederate experience established a covenanted identity among Southerners,” that became the basis for the “sense of Southern mission” (Wilson 80).

One of the motivating forces behind the War Between the States was sectionalism, not slavery; although, the peculiar institution played a major role in promoting the strong sectional conflict. Southern ministers accurately asserted that the “immediate reason for their defeat” was not slavery, an institution about which they were still defensive, but the “superior material resources of the North,” (Wilson 69). The industrialized, urban North had virtually no need for slave labor and avoided many of the

class conflicts that plagued an agrarian, rural South dependent not only on slave labor but also indentured servitude and sharecropping to perpetuate the European inspired “paternalistic aristocracy of the Old South” plantation (Wilson 90). General Robert E. Lee became a popular example of those members of the aristocratic class who “suffered with his people,” and he was highly respected for his “opposition to slavery but love of Virginia,” his home state, that had influenced his decision about entering the war effort and for which side (Wilson 49). However, most Southerners had not the means to own slaves or even their own land for that matter, but it was these proud but culturally prejudiced men who accounted for much of the Confederate army. Why allow slaves to go free while as long as they remained at the base of the class hierarchy, a poor white could still claim superiority over a supposedly inferior group? By the 1890s, segregation had become the “accepted substitute for slavery,” (Wilson 109) and disenfranchisement of Negroes had “correctly settled the political aspect of the racial relationship” (Wilson 110).

Wilson stated that race was “intimately related to the story of the Lost Cause but was not the basis of it,” and was not even at the center of it (Wilson 12). The slavery issue had been the leading factor in the division of the Protestant denominations into distinctive Northern and Southern conventions, but these now distinctly Southern denominations were “culturally captive, because they needed a consensus of separate values from the North in order to maintain a separate identity.” This fear mobilized the churches and “enabled them to extend extraordinary influence in preserving the South’s status quo” (Wilson 10). Undoubtedly, “intense denominational debates and squabbles occurred” among the various Protestant sects, each fearing “their own loss of separate

status;” though, even these disputes were not allowed to “obscure the fundamental agreements of the churches” (Wilson 9). All Protestants seemed to understand that there was a purpose in defeat and God in his wisdom had chosen this path to “prepare the Christian Churches of these States for their high and holy mission, as the custodians of an unadulterated evangelism, and as his honored instruments for the development of a pure Christian civilization throughout this continent and throughout Christendom” (Wilson 74). In spite of “marked evidence of sectional reconciliation,” the churches in the South remained among the region’s “most distinctly sectional institutions” (Wilson 161).

The call for secession, not just as denominations, but also as states did not cause the citizens of the Southern states to cease to be Americans. During the war, members from both sides “rarely seemed to doubt that God was on their side,” and once the opposing sides were officially reunited, it was once again taken for granted that God was on the side of the United States of America in whatever cause they found themselves involved (Wilson 32). After the war, the rebellious Southerners did not lose their American citizenship nor were they collectively labeled traitors to the Union, since the Confederate experience was seemingly an experiment tested and found to be nonviable. The solution to being both Southern and American lay in the fact that a “separate culture, with religion at its heart, could thrive within the boundaries of the nation,” (Wilson 138) and Southerners “eventually regained pride in being Americans, as well as citizens of Dixie” (Wilson 161). Paradoxically, the intensification of memory did not indicate “increased Southern isolation from the nation” (Wilson 162). Of course, the world did not live on memories nor could it thrive on them, and these memories only posed a threat to the security of the nation if the South intended to act on them again. Regardless of

reconciling with the North, Southerners still bristled with anger when they “heard Northern criticism of the Southern past” (Wilson 103). But was it the failure of the North to place more stringent sanctions upon the conquered people that allowed them the means, motive, and opportunity to create an enduring separate cultural identity? The South was willing to accept defeat and there existed a “steady growth of sentiment” (Wilson 38) toward a “fair reconciliation with the North,” (Wilson 23) but like “true Confederates, Southern states could not at first agree among themselves” (Wilson 28).

Only by drawing upon the heritage of the Southern past, an “identity forged in the Civil War” and separate from the American identity, was economic and societal corruption from the North avoided (Wilson 98-9). Certain ministers made it their mission to warn “their brethren of the dangers in abandoning traditional Southern values and failing to meet the high standards of the Confederate past” (Wilson 79). They had made the South; now they had to make Southerners. Southerners realized that “if their children rejected the Confederacy,” then the Southern Way of Life would not survive. The Lost Cause movement made it possible to retain that identity “in light of the crushing defeat and poverty that war had brought,” but the main objective was for their descendants to “understand that defeat had not destroyed the relevance of the Southern resistance to that identity” (Wilson 139). With the story of the South in the form of a narrative, something enduring was being created and by naming, classifying, and organizing the past, it became significant and fulfilled the objective of reinforcing inclusion in a distinct group for those who had been deprived by virtue of being born too late to actually experience it. A positive aspect of the Lost Cause religion was the provision of a “worthwhile sense of continuity with the past, preserving for the Southern young an awareness of their origins

and preventing the sense of rootlessness and alienation that might have resulted from Confederate defeat” (Wilson 159). However, proponents of a fair reconciliation on both sides could hardly ignore the fact that the “federal union was no longer the same as it had been in 1787.” Accordingly, “a fear of catastrophe” haunted many Southerners, particularly “Southern preachers accustomed to thinking in apocalyptic terms” (Wilson 23).

Despite defeat, the South maintained that they “had not been wrong in the war,” and its people remained a powerful, albeit a somewhat oppressed, force in the politics of the nation, agreeing to co-exist but refusing to simply assimilate (Wilson 22). Southerners continued to “define themselves in relation to the North” after the war (Wilson 81) and while they allowed the North their materialistic triumph, they claimed the “southern victory as a spiritual one.” They were “cautioned against doubting Divine Providence” and lived under a prediction of “Northern doom if the region learned only pride from the war” (Wilson 70). Though the Confederacy’s defeat was accepted as final, Southerners “repeatedly speculated that God might allow Confederate principles to succeed in another guise, in another time” (Wilson 73).

Most Southerners served the Lost Cause, but they found “different meanings in it.” Politicians and political philosophers interpreted the Lost Cause as a “defense of states’ rights, and they waved the gray shirt to enable former Confederates to win election” (Wilson 37). The polarizing “political issue of states’ rights” and power concentrated in a centralized national government that had initially led to secession and continued to plague the attempts at progress in the recently reinstated Union recalled the Revolutionary argument between Antifederalists and Federalists (Wilson 65). As the

cultural dream gradually replaced the political dream, Southerners discovered that they could “honor the American political nation if it honored the Southern civilization, including a degree of local self-government” (Wilson 161). They wanted to be a part of the nation and “yet not fully of it” (Wilson 164). But to abandon the states’ rights principle was to “betray America’s founding fathers as well as the Confederate ones” (Wilson 65). A compromise to the outcome of the Civil War was that the “Northern armies saved the Union, while ‘the armies of the South saved the rights of the States within the Union’” (Wilson 165).

After committing themselves and giving “their last drop of blood,” Southerners “confidently left ‘the issues with God’,” (Wilson 71) but the issues raised a “traditional religious problem: How could the righteous man or cause be defeated when a just, omnipotent God ruled the universe?” Perhaps, the Southern ministers who attempted to tackle this quandary were too shortsighted in their “hope of ultimate victory” in another war or maybe they did not comprehend what was happening at the time in the nation’s capital (Wilson 58). Many ministers of the Lost Cause “revealingly maintained that Southerners were ‘related towards the government and Northern people’” somewhat as were their “Blessed Lord and the Apostles towards the Roman authorities and population; submission but without other ties” than general good interest and “the common brotherhood of humanity” (Wilson 63). If suffering was “a means to greater faith,” then the seemingly “unnecessary and cruel” Reconstruction era provided the opportunity for Southerners to at least “draw closer in adversity” (Wilson 71) and “testify to their religion’s truth” (Wilson 72). In an attempt to preserve the faith, one minister went so far as to suggest that it was not Providence but “the devil’s work that defeated” the South

(Wilson 66). In the demanding postwar years, clergymen feared the “war-engendered skepticism but hoped to preserve at least pockets of spiritual purity, with the aim of redeeming Southern society in the future” (Wilson 67).

The ultimate hope for victory came not in the form of a separate government, and therefore, the “Confederate Cause was no longer a lost cause” (Wilson 168). The South, “in the providence of God” and “by steadfastness to principle,” had been blessed with the opportunity to attain “an even greater influence among the nations than would have come with Confederate independence” (Wilson 65). The former Confederacy searched for a means to avoid becoming a land without ruins, because a land without ruins was one without memories and a land without memories was one devoid of liberty. After all, “the triumphs of might” were transient, they passed and were forgotten, but “the sufferings of the right” were impressed “deepest on the chronicle of nations” (Wilson 59).

Since the founding of the United States, most presidents had been Southern by birth and the majority would continue to call the South home. Even if the president himself were not a Southerner, the region undoubtedly made sure that their voice was nearly impossible to ignore by surrounding the Northern or Western president with influential pro-Southerners to advise and, at times, coerce the actions necessary to preserve equality in the administration of a national government. Southerners also proudly pointed to “Southern enlistments in the American army” during the succeeding Spanish-American War and World War I to prove their loyalty to the nation; though, the implication of past disloyalty enraged them, (Wilson 163) since they believed their region to be “the most American of all areas of the country” (Wilson 164). Of course, in the eyes of some, this spirit “promoted love of nation,” because ““the surest love of country””

began with “love of one’s native place,” and “loyalty to one’s section” was the “mother of that loyalty that feels for the whole country” (Wilson 170-1). The war had been won and the nation, under God, proven “greater than any section”, but sectionalism was a battle that would rage on without resolution (Wilson 170).

Southerners made one attempt to “utilize the spiritual resources of their historical experience, but as in all things human, they fell short of perfection” (Wilson 17). Wilson noted in his introduction that it could be said that the South’s “kingdom was to be of culture, not of politics” (Wilson 1). The evolving significance of the Lost Cause suggested that the destiny at which the nation “arrived as a united people” could never have been achieved “by a divided country” (Wilson 163). For those who survived to see the ultimate Confederate surrender, the war became the “greatest personal experience of their lives, and it understandably influenced their later activities” (Wilson 6). The fear that a “crushing defeat might eradicate the identity forged in war” led Southerners to reassert that identity with a vengeance, so that in present and future crises, they would be prepared to meet the challenges (Wilson 7).

In an understatement, one minister remarked that national hero Lee as “the supreme priestly celebrant” (Wilson 122) of the Southern civil religion was “pure enough to have founded a religion,” but the question must be posed, did Lee not at least contribute to the founding of a quasi religion (Wilson 49)? Lee seemed to be the only Confederate hero able to meet a need that the people of his region perceived, but the question has remained whether he was chosen by design or intention. The Southern public religion was not a formal one, but it did function as such, and adherents to the Lost

Cause religion chose to remember their suffering and “cultivated the memory, in order to affirm that it was not meaningless” (Wilson 16).

Due to the unique decisions and alterations made by Southerners at the conclusion of a bitter and far from civil war, advocates of conservative religion and regional tradition were able to march from victory to victory after finding success in defeat. Several years after the War, Lee was said to have remarked to General Wade Hampton that the Confederates “could have pursued no other course without dishonor,” and sad as the result was, “if it had all to be done over again,” they should be “compelled to act in precisely the same manner” (Grissom 338). While the Southern political nation was never resurrected as many had hoped and prayed, it did live on, and some might argue that it still lives on, as a powerful, sacred presence.

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