The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice: Lynching in the American South

Human sacrifice to a vengeful deity conjures savage and exotic images that distance us from the practice they represent by being strangely obscene. Just as savage but less exotic are images of lynched African Americans in the Southern United States. The word "lynched" rips from reluctant memories shame, guilt and anger at white atrocities. The stark reality behind the word is a historical presence that belies patriotic celebration and challenges professions of national innocence; its condensation of white people’s fury and black people’s anguish is as intensely malevolent as human sacrifice. Although the facts of lynching are well known among selected scholars and perhaps families descended from its victims, only in the past few years have they once again seized the collective memory of Americans. Photographic reports of lynching that appeared at exhibitions in New York and Atlanta were disturbing to those who studied them in a mixture of awe, horror, and profound sadness; the website and book that continue to present such images to a larger audience leave observers with a range of emotions that are sometimes incapable of utterance. Learning of such things, and gazing at photographs of illegally and communally executed victims, college students have wondered, “Why haven’t we been told of such things?” From an audience of elders, however—when hearing of such things, has erupted the query, “Wasn’t anything good happening at the time?”—a question that shouts in objection: “Do not tell us of such things!”1 These two responses are familiar. American citizens, recently subjected to other ugly photographic representations of their culture, have objected to the torture and humiliation of prisoners in American custody at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison. Others defiantly protest that no one should ever have revealed what was “going on” among detainees (Sontag; Sullivan).

1See Allen et al., Without Sanctuary. Students’ questions occurred within an undergraduate history research seminar in the spring of 2004; the auditor’s questions occurred after a lecture to alumni at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in May 2005. See also http://www.americanlynching.com. This essay is an edited and compressed version of an article that appeared first in the Journal of Southern Religion.
Americans want to be told the worst to understand themselves; at the same time, they do not want to hear the worst because it belies their plaints of innocence.

Over the past twenty-five years historians have insisted that well-informed people learn the worst. Before 1979, Fitzhugh Brundage notes, historians of the American South took little interest in lynching. The act was receding into a premodern past, and scholars believed that mobs who triggered it were made up of “individuals poorly integrated into the larger society.” Because they associated lynching with “rural culture corrupted by drunkenness, irreligion, illiteracy, poverty, and excessive license,” social scientists thought that as the South became urban and industrial, mechanisms of social control “would become strong enough to discourage extra-legal violence and discredit the values that sustained it.” Other explanations focused on “individual psychopathologies” related to sexuality and gender and on the mechanism that projects one’s own forbidden thoughts onto black men (Brundage, “Introduction” 6-7). But social historians emphasized that lynching was not the result of “failed social control or exceptional social and psychological states” so much as of “ongoing political and economic contests present in all societies: violence [was] a by-product of ‘normal’ collective action” (Brundage, “Introduction” 7-10). How to understand the “normal” received an innovative jolt from Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s *Revolt Against Chivalry* in which she moved closer to an understanding of social dramas than had previous students (Turner; Geertz). Hall rooted lynching in patriarchal racial and gendered orders to demonstrate how a complex brutal public ritual could convey a broad range of meanings and demonstrate where every person fit into the hierarchy of community life. Sharing Hall’s sensitivity to the sexual but not to the gendered meanings of lynching, Joel Williamson teased out the psychosexual tensions released by economic insecurity and the shame evoked by fusing sex and failure in the dynamic conflicts of a changing culture. Bertram Wyatt-Brown and Edward Ayers delved into the culture of honor to explain collective white violence (Brundage, *Under Sentence* 11-13; Ayers).

Perhaps the most impressive sustained analyses of lynching in the early 1990s were Brundage’s *Lynching in the New South* and Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck’s *A Festival of Violence*. The latter was based on analyses of an impressive county-by-county inventory of data on
lynching in a South that excluded Virginia and Texas but included Kentucky. The demographics, economics, seasons, and politics of lynching were patterned and correlated statistically to establish trends. Tolnay and Beck found that lynching was “an integral element of an agricultural economy that required a large, cheap, and docile labor force.” When African Americans began to leave the South in significant numbers, “violence and terrorism” began to disappear. They agree with Brundage (as they state his thesis) that lynchings were “crucial mechanisms” for assuring perpetuation of a plantation economy (Tolnay and Beck 255-57). But Brundage also emphasized that lynching happened where the political culture had already made violence a demonstrably useful tool.\(^{2}\) The essays Brundage brought together in *Under Sentence of Death* nicely complemented these two books by reminding scholars that lynching was part of a texture of violence that included near-lynching and legal-lynching as well. The essays also pointed out that the social genesis of lynching implies distance, hierarchy, polarization and objectification of the other—not altogether surprising conclusions. Nor is it surprising for scholars to have inferred that although events can indeed fall into patterns, analyzing the complexity of each case will confound easy generalization. Still to be addressed, Brundage believed, were the nature of contagion, the linkages of “gender, race, and class,” and lynchings that did not happen (Brundage “Introduction”). Since that time, scholars have been trying to do as Brundage suggested, building upon the innovative works of the early 1980s to study specific, dramatic incidents of violence\(^{3}\) or to probe patterns within geographical areas or to explore associated issues such as gender.\(^{4}\) Historians have dissected individual lynchings such as those of Leo Frank, Jesse Washington, Cleo Wright, Emmett Till, and Tom Shipp

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\(^{2}\) In *Lynching in the New South*, Brundage contrasts Virginia and Georgia. The latter was a high lynching state with a peculiar history of political violence that encouraged mobs to believe they could terrorize blacks with impunity. Virginia’s history and the political will of authorities were less amenable to the terror that characterized white supremacy in Georgia.

\(^{3}\) See, for example, Dinnerstein, Ellis, McGovern, MacLean, Smead, Whitfield; see also Wolf. There are many other articles on specific lynchings; citations may be found in Brundage, *Under Sentence*.

\(^{4}\) See Ingalls, MacLean; Marshall, Waldrep, and Wright. The lists could fill a book, and they have: see Moses.
and Abe Smith in Marion, Indiana, and the epidemic of violence in Elaine, Arkansas, in 1919.\textsuperscript{5} Some have linked populist violence, African American resistance, and legal innovation as did Mark Curriden and LeRoy Phillips, Jr., in Contempt of Court, and in 2000, David Margolick published Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights. Recently there have been essays on various aspects of culture and lynching, with an overview of lynching by Philip Dray appearing in 2002.\textsuperscript{6}

The achievements have been impressive; but few have been arrested by Gwendolyn Brooks’s insight that “the loveliest lynchee was our Lord” (87-89). Few have wondered why it made sense to envision a lynched black man as Christ upon the Cross; that is, to imagine lynching as a human sacrifice demanded by a vengeful divinity even though it is clear from reports of observers that participants sensed that somehow lynching was suffused with a religious mood (Schecter 297; Apel 60, 103, 105, 107, 115; Madison; Wellford; Harris). A newspaperman observing the lynching of Leo Frank, for example, recalled that over the entire affair there glinted a penumbra that suggested a “religious rite”; there was a “curiously reverent manner” and a “grave satisfaction” among the actors (MacLean 940). Nancy MacLean’s brilliant analysis of Frank’s murder seizes on the identification of Jews with capitalism but ignores the reverence one sensed in the event and did not reflect on the lesson that adult Christians in Georgia had learned before being plunged into Christ’s death at baptism and raised in His resurrection: Jews had repudiated “the Lord.” There are other references by observers of the process of lynching to ritual or the “ritualized manner” in which blacks were lynched (Dyer 100; Baker 239). There was something quite transcendent to the experiences of individuals and groups in a public lynching but that transcendence has been difficult to engage in a meaningful way except to recount that it was there even if we didn’t know exactly what “it” was in “its” mystery and horror, though to be sure we can sometimes sense mystery in images. In Patricia Schecter’s compelling discussion of “How Antilynching Got its Gender,” for example, there is a vivid “figure” the presence of which underscores silence about the meaning of ritual, symbol, rite, “reverent,” and

\textsuperscript{5}Capeci, Stockley, Madison, Oney, Till-Mobley and Benson, Bernstein.

\textsuperscript{6}See Apel, Carrigan, Gussow, Markovich, Pfeifer, Rice, Steelwater, and Waldrep.
“satisfaction”—these words all refer to a religious sensibility reflected in the crucifixion of a black man on a modern Golgotha (Schecter 297). The silence about the religious penumbra of lynching is strange because of the common knowledge that crucifixion, an act of violence, is at the very core of the Christian paradigm that was so essential a part of Southern culture. African Americans understood this; they understood that Christ, too, had been lynched.

Silence on the religious mood is surprising because of the furtive presence of the sacred in studies of Southern violence. Discussions of lynching have sometimes referred to the almost “primitive” religion of people from whom perpetrators were presumed to have come. Thus, Arthur Raper, in his classic survey The Tragedy of Lynching, included a religious profile of counties in which collective murders took place. Although he located the causes of violence against blacks in racial prejudice, poverty, illiteracy, isolation, and ignorance, Raper seemed to believe that religion also had something to do with lynching. He knew that religion and community were fused and observed that clergymen all too easily reflected the values of their community, a fact that nullified Christian compassion for black victims (71). The ministers, Raper thought, had not taught their people “the sacredness and value of human personality” (53). This phrase reflected an insight of a Personalist Methodism with which he was associated by background and marriage; but as a social scientist instead of a student of religion he could not move beyond his dismay that the religion that enshrouded lynchers was so primitive and savage.7 Jacquelyn Hall, like Raper, fully understands that her story takes place within the Bible Belt and is profoundly sensitive to the gendered and class meanings of ritual behavior in lynching (180). She exploits Clifford Geertz’s famous analysis of a Balinese cockfight to define such killing through his description of a drama in which participants are caught up in “the creative power of an aroused masculinity and the destructive power of loosened animality” (131 and 306; Geertz, Interpretation 420-21). The weight of the citation in the

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7Borden Parker Bowne, the Boston and Methodist Personalist philosopher who was beginning to attract attention from Southern Methodists in the 1890s, could easily have written the phrase Raper used. Raper’s father-in-law was a distinguished Southern Methodist minister. See Bowne; for an example of the influence of Personalism on Methodism, see Knudson.
context of Hall’s discussion was on “masculinity” and “animality”—not “good and evil.”

One who did attempt to address religion and violence was Joel Williamson in his prize-winning *The Crucible of Race*; but he preferred to think of religion as an alternative activity after a cycle of violence and radical racism rather than context or catalyst (310-17). He ignored the gradual waxing of organized religion in the South throughout the period from 1870 to 1930 and preferred to think of it as an eruption of extreme “otherworldliness” after racist violence had failed to bring relief from the dissonance between the imperative and the empirical. Moreover, Williamson believes that what he calls “fundamentalism” and “otherworldliness” were innovations of the period after 1900, when they were merely part of a heightened trajectory of religious life begun with the first evangelical preaching of the 1740s and 50s (Mathews). These historical roots were very much on Suzanne Marshall’s mind when she linked religion with violence “in the Black Patch [tobacco-growing] culture” of Kentucky and Tennessee. Her conclusion was suggested by a religion that had scourged the area since the Great Revival with a punitive divine Patriarch, draconian in His ways with men, women, children, and nature, whose punishments modeled the harsh penalties His devotees “meted to violators of community standards.” The fusion of violence and religion flowed from family as well as church; violence was an appropriate way for patriarchs to rear children and train their wives. It was not always easy, of course, to distinguish divine from human wrath (43, 89-91, 99-100). Marshall did not argue that religion alone caused violence, but she did attempt to factor it into a context that shaped a pervasive understanding of sanction and justice in an agricultural region under strain (See Waldrep, *Night Riders* 15-17, 50-51, and 67). Except for Williamson’s ruminations, Marshall’s analysis was virtually unique. A survey of articles and books on Southern violence in 2000 yielded few if any other discussions of such a connection; so did a survey of works on religion in the South.

By 2001, scholars knew that the actual, poetic, graphic, even photographic images of crucified (sacrificed) black men reflected a range of meanings. For crucifiers, the twisted, burned, or slashed body signified elemental justice, a necessary, even moral, act in a drama of punishment and pain that portrayed good and evil in a way that could sacralize white supremacy at least for the moment. For those transfixed by a perceived
outrage against reason and law, the detritus of collective murder signified a negation of civilization. For those who could see themselves in the lifeless corpse, whites’ bloodletting could signify a world-shattering threat to self and family so overwhelming in its nihilism that black people could imagine the “lynchee’s” death as a vicarious sacrifice given (even if taken) in their stead. Their knowledge of the cross and the suffering and crucified Lord in their own lives of prayer and collective worship as Christians prepared them to think of lynching not only as an act of white terror, but also as a signifier of the burdens, that is the cross, they carried which they hoped would be but a prelude to resurrection. Each of these perspectives suggests what anthropologists understand (in various ways) as “ritualization,” or the phenomenon in which Catherine Bell calls “a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures” (8).

For those in charge of lynching, the body of the victim was transformed from a human being into a representation of what was supposed to be valued by the community. The actions inflicted upon the body by ritual performers enacted good and evil, ordered social divisions, debased the object and elevated the transcendent imagined beyond the action itself. In 2001, an analysis of lynching photography demonstrated how “photography simulated the effects of lynching as a ritual, becoming a pivotal step [that] . . . affirmed and made manifest white solidarity and supremacy” (Wood 195). Amy Louise Wood emphasized the ritual importance of lynching not as a form of fixed social solidarity but as a pervasive repeatable ritualization of power relations practiced on black bodies to assert, confirm, and celebrate white “honor” against threatened “chaos and discord,” the envisioning of which demanded “constant replenishing” in a performance that arrested the imagination (Wood 198, 199). Lynching was that performance, and photography, Wood writes, “played a crucial role in this performative ritual and the social roles it produced,” making the rituals widely known and broadly engaged far beyond the site of the original practice and allowing time for a moment of reflection (199 and 199–208). For both witnesses and participants the killing, together with all the accretions of ritual action associated with it, was a religious practice. The expectations of the crowd—participant or curiosity seeker or offended observer—were riveted to the subject as
if what happened to him or her would *compensate* for the original breach of communal harmony and the moral economy. The subject’s death was supposed to mean something, solve something, sanctify something through the infliction of sometimes excruciating pain. Lynching apologists believed their action to have had far greater meaning than a simple killing; it was an act through which to teach, they said, a *lesson* of profound importance; it was a practice through which the enactors aspired to transcendence!

**Segregation as Religion**

The overlay of religion and lynching in the New South is a compelling problem because both were waxing in influence throughout the region at the same time (1880-1900) and because it seems natural to believe that a simultaneous increase in religion and illegal collective violence throughout the same region is at least a paradox if not a contradiction (if we ignore medieval Crusades and modern jihadists). Southerners may have been sloughing off the rule of church discipline by the Great War, but they had been joining the church in greater numbers since the 1880s and reaffirming their faith at the urging of local as well as nationally renowned evangelists (Wills; Ownby 194-212; Waldrep, *Night Riders* 115). To be sure, Southern white communities of faithful people had been physically and morally devastated by the Civil War; but gradually churchmen and women had rebuilt local churches, colleges, and denominational boards and bought new presses (Daniel 44-63). During the 1890s, denominational bodies could report that new educational and missionary facilities were producing more members than ever before; in every Southern state but North Carolina, the percentage increase in communicants far surpassed the population change in the general population (Ayers 498-500; Farish 63-105; Harvey 24-31; Thompson 28-70; Ownby 122-64). Statistics, however, under-report the percentages and numbers of people who could be said to have come under the sway of religion, which affected a majority of people. Women were probably sixty percent of church members and it may be assumed they did attempt to live up to cultural expectations by influencing both their children who were not on the rolls and the men with whom they lived. Moreover, a dramatic increase in support for legislative prohibition also suggests a trajectory of moral influence mixed
of course with political calculation and class imperialism.\textsuperscript{8} Prohibition was a victory for Protestant Christianity in the South (Coker). Religion also suffused the educational facilities of the New South; A. D. Mayo certainly believed as much. As Commissioner of Education for the US government, Mayo, a Unitarian minister not infatuated with evangelical Protestantism, found in the South what he thought was a socially redemptive process. He saw it in the increasing number of pious young women in the 1890s who were entering Southern schoolrooms to teach children the basic tools and values with which to bond communities together in a “common Christianity” much as missionaries were invading foreign lands (Mayo 59-70, 129-29, 150, 160).

Mayo’s words are quaint; few people talk as he did anymore, and when they do so their political agenda was often exclusivist and punitive. But this educational enthusiast was writing at a time when religious idiom and “progress” coincided. His words suggest that it is sectarian, secular or not, to identify the sacred only with “organized religion,” magic, superstition, or “belief in God.” All these things are religious, to be sure, but religion is something other than belief in a transcendent being, assent to a creed, participation in church, or a preternatural compulsion to sing “Amazing Grace” at funerals. Reference to a “common Christianity” was Mayo’s way of saying that human brother- and sisterhood were beginning to suffuse Southern society in such a way as to make it “Christian”—that is, by his lights, inclusive and just. That the trajectory of lynching was upward, that a “common Christianity” was anti-Semitic, and that he was far too optimistic even for a liberal are not impediments to understanding him. His insight was that religion can be understood as the pervasive ambience of society, the sum of its values, perhaps its ruling ideology, the pattern of ideas that normal people are supposed to believe.\textsuperscript{9} Mayo’s desire for a “common

\textsuperscript{8}The prohibition movements were ways of disciplining and controlling black men as well as white, and the racist expression of temperance campaigns implied the tactic of enlisting white “church people” in support of white supremacy; see Bode. See also Ansley, Isaac, Sellers, and Whitener.

\textsuperscript{9}“Pattern” and “normality” can be contested of course. In the United States over the past generation, conflict over what is “normal” and which “patterns” are to be preferred suggests the volatility and dynamism of such issues. But since these conflicts are about what is to be valued ultimately, and what is to be considered “sacred,” they take on the ambience of religious conflict. See Mathews, “Spiritual Warfare,” and Hunter. Another word for the phrase “pervasive ambience,” of course, is “culture.” In discussing culture
Christianity" was a comment about the future of society and reflected a belief in religion as integral to harmonious social relations. He understood that "religion" was to be found not only in institutions defined as "religious" but also in the quality and tone of society. That is, religion is social; it flows from social consciousness and, indeed, may be understood as the complex symbolic representation of the social order through which we learn transcendence. The concept of God may indeed have been birthed from our social consciousness, the experience of which transcends self to make demands upon us through a sacred sense of the Other. Historians, at least, should consider this broader and socially rooted insight of the classic sociologist Emile Durkheim, who argued, a disciple observes, in an almost egregious simplification, "that religious feeling is the individual's awareness of the group" (Hamerton-Kelly 15; Williams, The Bible 16-17). Penalties, such as lynching, exacted of persons certified as having violated community in some way, could be said to have been expiation rendered to a power superior to individuals (Gorringe 54, 53-57). The just killings of those who have most horribly breached community life thus mean something transcedent to the individual and his/her community; they "set things aright" by forcing the one responsible for the breach to "pay for" it with his/her own life. The act and the impact must be thought dramatic enough to reenact the original breach in a death made good by "the community." Durkheim's insight makes it possible to think of executions as human sacrifice. The rite, "reverent manner" and "grave satisfaction," reported at Leo Frank's lynching were not, therefore, strange; they flowed naturally from the situation and culture in which they were observed; ritual was supposed to make the illegal killing "perfect" (Smith, "Capital Punishment" 3-25).

Durkheim's insights have helped generations of students understand the presence of the religious in society apart from specifically "religious"

as a system of symbols, Clifford Geertz says that "sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—their world view—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order." See Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," Interpretations 89.
institutions and ideas relating to deity.\textsuperscript{10} Clifford Geertz’s classic statement of religion as a cultural system provides an innovative advance. A. D. Mayo’s phrase, a “common Christianity,” used above, was analytically vague and too enthusiastic about the bonding capacities of “Christianity,” but he used it as a way of referring to that sense of contextual reality that may confront an observer in a moment of recognition as it did Dorothy when she exclaimed to Toto that the two were “not in Kansas anymore.” A better word is “culture,” which Geertz calls an “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols” (“Religion as a Cultural System” 89). Inviting scholars to think of religion as a cultural system, he defines a religion as

1. a system of symbols which acts to 
2. establish powerful, pervasive, and 
3. long-lasting moods and motivations in [humans] by 
4. formulating conceptions of 
5. a general order of existence and 
6. clothing these conceptions with such an aura of 
7. facticity that 
8. the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (90)

Symbols are representations of as well as prescriptions for “reality” (94) and even a symbolically stark Southern Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian Christianity over the years employed symbols of Crucified Christ, Baptism, open Bible, communion wine, sanctified bread, and empty cross fortified by ritual acts to represent the Christian drama of salvation. Symbols were essential to political speech as well as human relations at the time and could convey a range of meanings that patterned imaginative as well as everyday life. Black skin, white skin, the “New Negro,” the “black beast rapist,” “pure white women,” “Reconstruction,” “Whites only” placards, “Colored” signs—all these were symbols that established “powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations” that helped fabricate racial segregation in the late 1880s and early 1890s, by “formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of facticity that the moods and motivations seem[ed] uniquely realistic.” The fact that legislators had written distance and division into law may

\textsuperscript{10}Students may begin with Peter L. Berger, \textit{The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion} and Thomas Luckmann, \textit{The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society}. See also Mary Douglas, \textit{Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo}: “We shall not expect to understand religion if we confine ourselves to considering belief in spiritual beings, however the formula may be refined” (35).
have been “political” action, but it relied on feelings of purity and danger that were not legislated even though they had been fabricated.

If “religious feeling,” from wherever else it evolves, flows from “an awareness of the group,” segregation must be understood as a religious system. An obsession with the “group,” the structure and substance of human relations, commandeered Southern white elites and their mimetic constituencies after the Civil War. The media of this obsession were race and gender; and the ways in which law and violence worked together to distance human beings from each other, establish boundaries between them, and make dangerous the breaching of those boundaries were the ways of religion. Segregation was, to be sure, a political-economic system with laws to control workers essential to industrialization (Cell 134; Cohen; Woodward, The Strange Career). The system was developed from the logic of slavery and the separation of free blacks from whites in antebellum cities. Whereas masters and slaves may have lived in proximity before the war, class (master-slave) boundaries that reinforced white supremacy before Appomattox became horizontal (implying verticality) afterwards to fulfill the same functions. Southern public schools were segregated from their very beginning; and distancing of the races was to be facilitated, or at least symbolized further, by banning marriage between individuals of different “races” before 1884 in nine of eleven Southern legislatures (Cohen 214-15). Along with the acceleration of violence against African Americans there was also a remarkable increase in laws segregating the races during and after the 1890s (Woodward, The Strange Career 67-109; Ayers 67-68, 121-27, 136-46, 429, 433-34). By the end of the century, Southern states were preparing to separate blacks from the political system, too, through widespread disfranchisement (Ayers, 52-54, 146-49, 269, 175-78, 289-90, 298-99, 304-09, 409-13). The goal of this policy suggests, as Howard Rabinowitz has pointed out, that the alternative to segregation was neither equality nor integration but exclusion from all public facilities; that is, whites could have done worse things than what they in fact did (Rabinowitz, “More than the Woodward Thesis” 342-56; Woodward, Strange Career Critics 861).

They passed laws to perfect their mastery by fabricating an elaborate system of boundaries, taboos, and etiquette in order to establish purity (whiteness) and therefore impurity (blackness) by distancing black people from white and making proximity dangerous. To be sure,
segregation as a complex of widespread practices that varied according to space, time, and (frequently) whim, was not so much dogma as a mood that could be swiftly transformed into dogma by whites when it served their purposes. The Virginia historian and author Philip Alexander Bruce was one of the dogmatists; he thought the results of the segregation process had been “notable achievements” of “constructive local statesmanship.” Segregation laws, Bruce believed, preserved racial “integrity,” prevented conflict, avoided “moral contamination,” discouraged “social equality,” and relieved whites of painful “close physical contact” with blacks (Bruce 70-78). The “moral contamination,” which Bruce feared, flowed only in one direction, for, like so many other whites, Bruce viewed African Americans in terms of pollution. When they were marginalized by segregation laws, they were also made more dangerous in the minds of whites since the margins in culture are always dangerous (Douglas 140). Whites’ perception of the danger inherent in a new generation of black people undisciplined by slavery was reinforced by the actions of whites themselves in legalizing segregation and sustaining it with a sacred aura.

These feelings of pollution and danger from proximity to an anomalous other were reinforced by the tension that supported the “sexual alibi” for segregation. Bruce linked distance from the other in public education with the banning of miscegenation as part of the same impulse; in banning intermarriage among different races legislators and their successors were part of a process of separating the races in cities throughout the South, usually through local action (Rabinowitz, Race Relations 128-281). In the 1890s political antipathy between whites and blacks erupted into campaigns to disfranchise African Americans and separate dissident white farmers from their black neighbors through attacks on an aspiring younger generation of better educated black men as potential rapists of defenseless white women. Together with new increased region-wide segregation laws, electoral politics, racial suspicion and white-inspired hysteria about danger and pollution from black men and women, Southern white publicists manufactured what some writers have called a “rape complex” to justify lynching (Cash 116-20; Hall, Revolt 112, 129, 145-57; Sommerville, “The Rape Myth” 481-518; and Sommerville, Rape and Race). To assign the mental patterns behind this linkage of black men and white women to a neurotic obsession unsupported by statistics is beside the point. In the
cases of both lynching and segregation, the bodies of white females symbolized the social body, whether as little girls in grammar school or as adult women in masculine fantasy; the idea was and in many ways still is commonplace. Symbolically coupling white females with black males underscored the danger of crossing boundaries and quashing distance and stipulated the danger of any breach. A culture that already made woman a religious surrogate or mediator for men as well as the fount of purity found it amiable indeed to establish boundaries and distances that pushed black men to the margin of society to “protect” her. The pervasive belief that female virginity was sacred, together with the Christian conviction that sexual intercourse outside marriage was immoral, and whites' widespread assumption of their “racial” superiority, combined with aversive custom and political will to fabricate a system that had the tone, ambience, and imperative of certainty and facticity. Segregation became consensual among whites. It was right; the order of the universe confirmed it. It was sacred in that it placed certain issues beyond dispute; it approached holiness because it established boundaries which demanded that individuals “conform to the class to which they belong. . . . Holiness,” writes Mary Douglas, “means keeping distinct the categories of creation” (67).

Lillian Smith certainly remembered segregation as a form of holiness. In Killers of the Dream, she mused in a compelling, reflective and unforgiving manner about the ways in which “sin and sex and segregation” had suffused the lives of Southerners.11 She could not separate the three motifs. Although as an adult she believed that Christian love impugned segregation, as a child she had been taught together with other white children “to love God, to love our white skin and to believe in the sanctity of both” (Smith, Killers 83). She had learned sin and guilt within the incubation of a “warm, moist evangelism and racial segregation” sanctified by a religion “too narcissistic to be concerned with anything but a man’s body and a man’s soul.” The body

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11Smith’s comment in “A Report from Lillian Smith on Killers of the Dream.” An editorial in the Atlanta Constitution referred to Smith as “the ex-missionary who has made a profession of writing stuff that purposely sets out to debase the South, with a fury that continually overleaps itself.” “Miss Smith,” wrote Ralph McGill of the Constitution, is “a prisoner in the monastery of her own mind.” See Lillian Smith Papers 1283A, University of Georgia Library, Box 30. Even recent critics find her too absorbed in race to be a worthy critic of the South. See Hobson. Because Smith focused on segregation, Hobson writes, she missed “much of what else the South was and had been” (321).
was the “essence of morality,” based as the latter was on the “mysterious matter of entrances and exits,” sin hovering “over all doors.” Critics, favorable or not, commented on her weaving of Freudian insights into the fabric of her interpretation, but her primary focus was segregation. It was part of the mental process of pushing “everything dark, dangerous, and evil” to “the rim of one’s life” where danger lurked. Evil was thought to have been purged from the sin-distressed self so that [white] Southerners had become fascinated with other people’s evil rather than their own and had somehow been compelled to find personal salvation in the “death of Christ” without carrying the cross (Smith, *Killers* 88–90, 101, 224–52). Their self-conscious, narcissistic purity had shriven them of a capacity for understanding religion as service to the kingdom. Although Smith was in what she later recalled as “a kind of amnesia about God,” as she wrote the first edition of *Killers*, she nonetheless understood the intense psychic power of values taught by God-like parents who fused the spectrum of white-purity-god-aversion into a powerful compound of holiness (Loveland 172). She has been classified as part of a “shame and guilt” school of Southern writers; she was too passionate, eloquent, and angry, her critics thought: she was too much the prophet (Loveland 97–105; Hobson 308–13). Many people thought she was a heretic. Since she attacked the primary religious structure of the South, indeed she was. Smith’s scrutiny of separation and purity was based on her own experience and an outraged recognition of the meanings of the spectrum, sin-sex-and-segregation. The cultural patterns that connected law, practice, morality, and meaning were woven and sewn together through a long creative process and could reflect differing local fabrics and textures. If locales produced varieties of separation, those who were separated and those who did the separating never varied. “Moods and motivation” of distance and boundary suffused the South and if legal patterns fabricated with regard to transportation after 1890 were new then, they merely replicated the sensibility reflected in educational segregation and local varieties of distancing that fused identity-class-race from the very day Emancipation had been enacted and contested. If slavery had been abolished, the meanings inferred by whites from enslavement had not been abolished; in fact, those meanings were intensified and transcribed into the canon of difference-purity-and-danger that compelled a credo of race-and-power as rich in meaning for
the faithful as the esoteric mysteries of the Apostle’s Creed. There were few white protestants in this catholic faith of hierarchy-separation-and-distance.

If there was a polarity between racial “conservatives” and “radicals,” the latter representing the pole of racial hatred (Williamson 285-323), both poles existed within the broader consensus of racial holiness. With the passing of each year after the onslaught of economic depression in the late 1880s and early nineties, separation-boundary-and-purity became ever more pervasive in public discourse and action. Prohibition movements in Southern states provided impetus to the process of enforcing purity until the South became legally dry before the First World War. The white ribbons of women’s temperance symbolized a ubiquitous Southern “purity” associated with light skin, white supremacy, self-discipline, and teetotaling clarity. If repressed male sexuality, combined with shame at economic weakness and guilt for real or imagined sexual trespasses, accounted for the rage with which white men confronted the “threat” from black men, there was a broader surge in white society that transcended the rage while making it legitimate.12 That the body was elevated to sacred status—its boundaries secured, its orifices purified, and its distancing perfected—reflected a society whose elites were determined to master and to control by violence if necessary. The fusion of Southern Protestantism with prohibition, repressed sexuality, and the canonization of white women all combined to blur distinctions between sacred and secular where race was concerned. If the logic of market relations and the consumption of commodities by different races could ironically destabilize segregation, true believers of all faiths burdened with internal contradiction could nonetheless model the holy zeal required of white Southerners for confirming orthodoxy in the face of dissent (Hale). Lillian Smith remembered that the Christian religion could also have destabilized segregation, but it hadn’t; for Southern whites learned Christianity and segregation from the catechism of domestic life that warned of “everlasting flames” for disobeying God within the canons of church and segregation (Killers 83, 85-86, 88-90).

12Joel Williamson puts the matter this way: “In their frustration white men projected their own worst thoughts upon black men, imagined them acted out in some specific incident, and symbolically killed those thoughts by lynching a hapless black man. Almost any vulnerable black man would do” (308).
Religion as Punishment

In a society where distinctions, boundaries, and margins were so important, the clergy insisted upon polarity, too. Ultimately, perhaps, the dread polarity between God’s Wrath and human sin was the most appropriate way of putting the matter; “belief in someone’s right to punish you,” wrote Lillian Smith “is the fate of all children in Judaic-Christian culture” (Killers 101). If the polarity was softened into Christian-and-world, or salvation-and-sin, or love-and-hate, binary opposition nonetheless persisted as it did in segregation. The word that reflected one side of the dichotomy has traditionally been “otherworldliness”; but it was otherworldliness plunged deep into this world. Christian commitment required (ideally) a rigorous life of self-discipline, self-reproach, and self-denial, which was decidedly “this-worldly.” Equally so were the distinctive ways in which communities of faithful people expressed their faith and communal connections, all of which were particular (at least to insiders) and each of which was authenticated by appeal to Holy Scripture, especially on contested issues. If “otherworldliness” was belied by the enchantment of “this” world in segregation, it was also affirmed by the need to understand and justify pain, moral failure, and death. Otherworldliness seemed to be associated with dogma, “narrowness,” biblicism, and irrelevance. This perspective, as one son of Dixie remembered, demanded that preachers speak “of God, of Truth, of Righteousness, of Judgment, the same yesterday, today and forever” (Williamson 313). The perspective was authoritative, certain, and clear. The hard and rigorous fundamentalism that Suzanne Marshall found throughout the violent culture of the Black Patch, the primitive Calvinism that caught Arthur Raper’s Methodist-lensed eye among vigilantes, and the punitive wrath that Lillian Smith recalled were all caught up in the Christian tradition that suffused Southern culture. Wilbur J. Cash captured the meaning of this “otherworldly” religion that so affected this world as “primitive frenzy and the blood sacrifice” (58).

It is correct now of course to distance oneself from Cash for his sexism, racism, and superb talent for sacrificing accuracy on the altar of meaning. His lack of proper respect for white Southerners’ intellect, or at least intellectuals, seems to be perfectly captured in the phrase. Citing a “primitive frenzy and the blood sacrifice” conveys the image of a savage South, a “savage ideal” that oversimplifies the region so cruelly
that we are bereft of the generous ambiguity of a complexity that includes educated if tedious clergymen, tortured if ineffectual writers, prophetic if isolated dissenters, and quietly heroic women. But the phrase lingers because it is true; if *primitive frenzy* is translated as the intense determination to act forcefully heedless of the law driven by a fusing of repressed sexuality, challenged patriarchy, and reasoned violence into the act of murder, we may be able to understand it in less emotionally freighted ways. But *frenzy* remains. The meaning of “blood sacrifice” is much more complex; and yet it is at the core of Southern white fundamental Protestantism. Blood sacrifice connects the purpose of white supremacists, the purity signified in segregation, the presumed magnificence of God’s wrath, and the permission granted through the wrath of “justified” Christians to sacrifice black men on the cross of white supremacy.

To write that Christianity permitted lynching within a segregated society is not a homiletic point. Nor is it on the other hand a preface to linking specific acts of violence with specific people in a specific place who did hideous things because God told them to do so. To be sure, that some people did believe they were absolutely justified amounts to the same thing; but that is not the point. The point is that because historians know that religious mood, ritual action, and moral outrage at black men were associated with illegal community acts of violence, students may want to go beyond mentioning such things to ask how we might understand this nexus, realizing that the task is not simple and that the connections run through the mentality of white Southerners if not necessarily their consciousness. At issue is neither the integrity of Christianity nor the ignorance and credulity of simple folk who believe myths that sophisticated modernists have rejected. At issue is the cultural reality behind what we have known existed but never had the temerity to confront; and the place to begin is Lillian Smith’s understanding of Christianity as punishment and W. J. Cash’s perception of the “blood sacrifice.” Sometimes even “classic” insights are true. It is important to ask: “How could Cash’s words have come so easily; did whites literally sacrifice blacks? Where could he possibly have conceived the fantastic metaphor that birthed such a preposterous idea?” The question is not rhetorical; there is a specific answer: “In church.”

If the brilliant if flawed Cash sloughed off loyalty to his Baptist past with the help of Baptist professors at a Baptist college, he could never
escape the homiletic images of his youth, especially the most dramatic ones. And “blood sacrifice” is dramatic; it was an essential part of Southern culture before the Second World War because it was central to the Christian narrative of salvation—as it still is for millions of Christians. That narrative was preached throughout the South for over two hundred years, and its most vivid images, plots, and symbols lay in “Jesus Christ and Him Crucified.” That phrase was the substance of preaching throughout the region although themes varied: they covered the range of Christian doctrines that began with salvation from sin. Theoretically at least, salvation lay not in abstinence from certain specific sins or in repression of the sinful self, although abstinence and repression were among the means of revealing one to be a “child of God.” Instead, salvation lay in Christ’s work on the cross; it lay in being justified by faith, certainly, but also in reliance upon His saving act through which a “price” had been paid and satisfaction made; it lay in sanctifying a life of obedience in anticipation either of a struggle for perfection or sanctified perseverance. The Bible, which contained the story of salvation, was to be read in the same way as sermons were to be heard, from the perspective of the cross; for if the Bible contained the Word it was the Word made flesh who dwelt “among us” and Who was crucified to set the universe aright. This was what the Apostle Paul had called the scandal of “the Cross.” Thomas Jefferson was certainly scandalized, for when he edited the Bible into the “Life of Jesus” so as to focus on what really mattered in Christianity, every Christian who had been “washed in the blood of the Lamb” knew that Jefferson had ripped salvation out of the Bible and left only an impossible ethic and a remarkable man; that was all, and that was not enough (Adams).

If churches and ministers could agree with Jefferson that the Christian life required strict morality, they dissented from the view that morality was sufficient for salvation as Socinians [Unitarians] and Deists were said to believe. If Christians who responded to evangelical preaching expected to be made forcefully aware of salvation through an inner conviction, the focus was not on sentiment alone, or the moment of illumination or on the physical manifestations of sentiment and illumination, but a “saving knowledge” that Christ had “died for me.” The words, “saving knowledge,” meant that “religious experience” went far beyond a mere inner feeling of being “saved.” “Saving knowledge,” meant knowing that one had been made just, and justified, before God,
but not justified through the experience itself. That experience had content: an inner knowledge that the crucifixion was “for me” and that it had conferred pardon through an objective act by a specific man[-God]: “Jesus Christ and Him Crucified.” Every doctrine of Christianity that represented the supernatural action of salvation always returned the believer to the mystery of the Cross.

It would be naive indeed to assume that every Christian in the South could have successfully passed an examination in systematic theology on the meanings of the cross. But no matter how imperfectly understood or internalized and no matter how much the slippage between private doubt and public profession, images and feelings of salvation were expressed throughout the music, songs, and hymns that were the theological tracts of folk who sang of

... my Savior and God!
O he died on Calvary,
To atone for you and me
And to purchase our pardon with blood. (Walker 25)

Familiar references to Christ as “Savior,” “blessed Savior,” “the Lamb,” the “dying, risen Jesus,” the “redeeming Lord” (Walker 26, 32, 45, 46, 55) all referred to a supernatural, vicarious and sacrificial act upon the cross:

Christ, the Lamb of God was slain
He tasted death for me. (Walker 102)

Christ did so, “Appeasing the wrath of God” and shedding “forth his blood as the cost” of doing so. The mystery of this would be made clear in the end-time when Christians should at last

... see the Savior
With shining ranks of angels come,
To execute his vengeance,
And take his ransom’d people home. (Walker 85, 63)

References were not to a teacher, but to Lord and Savior. Southern Protestant Christians shared with the ancient Church and the Roman Catholic Church the western inheritance of Jesus of Nazareth transfigured and revealed as Christ and Savior: He was the Word through whom creation came in the beginning and through whom after
the fall it was restored through crucifixion. No one had to understand it precisely (“we see through a glass darkly”) for no one could, but everyone who claimed to be a Christian had to profess that salvation came through a saving act of God; and that act was referred to in the language of “price,” “cost,” “ransom,” “penalty,” “pardon,” and “satisfaction.” And all these words were held together by the cosmic requirement that God Himself be held to account by His own Justice.

At the heart of salvation were the metaphors of retributive justice; at its center was a symbol of torture and death. The word for Christ’s saving action was “atonement.” However differently various communities of faith may have interpreted the implications, influences, and results of atonement, there was nonetheless significant agreement among white Southern Christians before 1930 on the signal importance of Christ’s sacrificial death. That agreement reflected a pervasive moral sensibility that emphasized divine wrath, with cosmic penalty for and condign punishment of sin. To be sure, the religion also emphasized vicarious payment of the penalty for sin by the Son of God whose action made salvation available; but according to tradition that action was a sacrifice, an act of violence. To be clear: the Christianity of the white South was a religion of sin, punishment, and sacrifice. It was a religion of violence. “Death is the penalty of sin,” wrote the definitive Southern Baptist theologian of the late nineteenth century (Mullins 323, 318-35); it was imposed, wrote a future bishop, by the “wrath of Almighty God” (Marvin 68, 87-89, 91; Mullins 333) whose nature, warned a fellow Methodist, was to “punish the guilty” (Ralston 235). As a Presbyterian divine insisted, “Vindicatory Justice [is] Essential to God” (Dabney, “Vindicatory Justice” 466). This insistence on punitive justice reflected the absolute righteousness of God as opposed to the total depravity of humanity that had fallen through the disobedient agency of Adam and Eve whose guilt was imputed to all those who came afterwards. If imputation was a point of contention between Calvinists and Wesleyans (Holifield 189-96), it did not preclude agreement until possibly the turn of the twentieth century that human beings deserved death as the moral penalty for the sin that thoroughly corrupted them. If they deserved death, however, how could they be saved from such a penalty? Their mere repentance, which was after all, their own act, could achieve nothing; the offense was too great, the resulting stain—some would say total depravity—was ineradicable (Mullins 325; Ralston 203; Dabney,
Christ 45-57, 62-63). Only an infinite act of Infinite Being could bridge the infinite distance between Divine Righteousness and human corruption.

Justice demanded blood sacrifice. Because the Old Testament background of sacrifice revealed that “the orisons of faith and penitence must be accompanied with the streaming blood of a victim and the venging fire of the altar,” the words associated with sacrifice—propitiation and expiation—were assigned to the Work of Christ (Dabney, “Vindicatory Justice” 466-67). “God set forth Christ,” wrote E. Y. Mullins, “as a propitiation for our sins”; he reminded people who already knew it that “Death is the penalty of sin.” Christ bore “the penal consequences of the sin of the race because of his complete identification with it.” He “endured the wrath of God . . . in the sense that he permitted the sin-death principle to operate in him” (Mullins 318). Christ died, Thomas Ralston reminded his own readers, in propitiation for human sins; he referred them, as would any knowledgeable Methodist preacher, to Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (3:25): “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forebearance of God.” Propitiation for both the Baptist and the Methodist as well as their Presbyterian and Episcopal colleagues meant that the punitive justice of ultimate reality had been meted out, the penalty for sin paid (Dabney, “Vindicatory Justice” 466-81). Moreover, because in the Old Testament the sacrifice of a victim was expiation, in that it removed the sins of the people, both concepts applied to Christ’s sacrifice (Ralston 201-29, 331, 335, 339ff.). That He acted for humans by becoming one of them while remaining “very God of very God” meant a vicarious sacrifice because finite human power could not pay the infinite price: He acted in humanity’s stead—atoned, that is, “paid the price” demanded by God’s justice, and “washed” humans in His blood.

Ministers knew that not all of their laity (or their colleagues) thoroughly understood or believed the complex connections that biblical scholarship provided, but there were other means to make the essential point. For people seeking to interpret their salvation in a dialectic

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13 For proof texts cited in support of the substitutionary atonement, see Dabney, Christ 87-98; Leviticus 1:4, 14:21, 17:11, passim; John 1:29; Romans 5:6; 1 Corinthians 6:20, 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 8:3, 9:11-14; 1 Timothy 2:6; 1 Peter 3:13, 2:24 among others.