A FEUDAL SOCIETY WITHOUT A FEUDAL RELIGION

Allen Tate and the Religion of the Whole Horse[*]

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I

In his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand* Allen Tate argued that the real defeat of the South came not at Appomattox, but afterward, as Southern society was slowly transformed into something alien.[1] One might say that the loss of the peace was far more devastating than the loss of the war. While this itself is not a particularly vexing observation, the surprise comes when Tate points his finger at the ultimate cause of this ultimate defeat: Southern religion.

> Because the South never created a fitting religion, the social structure of the South began grievously to break down two generations after the Civil War; for the social structure depends on the economic structure, and the economic conviction is the secular image of religion. No nation is ever simply and unequivocally beaten in war; nor was the South. But the South shows signs of defeat, and this is due to its lack of a religion which would make her special secular system the inevitable and permanently viable one (168).

For those of us with a deep and abiding concern for the South, not merely as she was, but as she is now and as she will be tomorrow, Tate's remarks are as sobering as they are surprising. The South's ingrained religiosity is undeniable, as is the fact that to this day she remains the most religiously observant and conservative section of these United States. But what if Tate was right? What if there was a fundamental disconnect between the Old South's religion and her way of life? What is the import for those of us today, who long for nothing so much as the spiritual regeneration of Dixies' Land?

About half way through his essay Tate employed a phrase that proves to be essential to his critique. The South, he wrote, "was a feudal society without a feudal religion" (166). My purpose is to try and unpack this statement so that we can fully appreciate, evaluate, and, I hope, improve upon Tate's thesis. I shall argue that a better way to put the distinction that Tate was trying to make is to say that the South lived an implicitly sacramental polity, but did not have an express, or formal sacramental religion to go with it. I shall further argue that so far from religion being the foundation of Southern society, it was the South's agrarian—what I shall call a *sacramental*—social structure that undergird the South's religion and insulated it from the liberalizing and moralizing influences of New England. In other words, Southern society was not conservative because it had a conservative religion; Southern religion was conservative because the underlying social structure was conservative, more specifically, agrarian. If this be true, then the breakdown of the social order would inevitably have a deleterious effect on religious faith and practice. This, in turn, raises significant questions for those with an interest in the spiritual as well as cultural renewal of the South: Whence cometh this renewal? "For if the salt hath lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted?"

While focusing on Tate's analysis, I shall also make liberal use of Richard Weaver's concept of piety and A. J. Conyer's notion of an "incarnational sensitivity" in religion.[2] The two concepts are essential for understanding the Old South, for Southern piety was indeed "incarnational"—even sacramental—in its quotidian expressions. But Southern religion, however Calvinistic it may have been on the surface, was more indebted to Ulrich Zwingli when it came to the formal elucidation of rites and rituals. And this is precisely what I mean when I say that the South had a sacramental polity, but not a sacramental religion.

II

Though Tate would not convert to Roman Catholicism for another twenty years or so, his "Remarks on the Southern Religion" might well be interpreted as a broadside against Protestantism, which he describes as a "non-agrarian and trading religion; hardly a religion at all, but a result of secular ambition" (168). Indeed, one might be tempted to conclude that the central thesis of the entire essay is that if the South had just been Roman Catholic, as opposed to Protestant, she would have survived the war intact. Whether or not Tate himself would have approved of such a reading, Protestantism is certainly cast as a villain of sorts in the essay. It is essential that we understand why.

For the Agrarians generally, religion was defined in terms of man's relationship with nature. As the Statement of Principles puts it: "Religion is our submission to the general intention of a nature that is fairly inscrutable; it is the sense of our role as creatures within it" (xiv). This is easily contrasted with the attitude of modern industrialism: not submission *to* nature, but the submission *of* nature to the iron will and technological genius of man. From this standpoint, Agrarianism is seen as an essentially religious form of economic and social articulation, while industrialism is fundamentally anti-religious, in *deed* if not necessarily in words.

Of course, the subjugation of nature is *the* defining characteristic of modernity, and Tate noted that even the Jamestown project was "a capitalistic enterprise undertaken by Europeans who were already convinced adherents of large-scale exploitation of nature, not to support a stable religious order, but to advance the interests of trade as an end in itself" (167). Nevertheless, something happened in the South that caused her course to diverge widely from that of New England:

> … soil and climate made the agrarian life generally more attractive than a barrener soil and a colder climate could have ever done, and … the propitious soil and climate made it possible for a feudal system of labor to take root and thrive.

Thus, the Southern economy was a case of "atavism, a throwback" to an older form of social relation.

Now, if the peculiar conditions of soil and climate made feudalism possible on the banks of the James, Savannah, and lower Mississippi, the prevailing intellectual winds of the time prevented the same kind of thing from happening in regard to religion: "The South could blindly return to an older secular polity, but the world was too much with it, and it could not create its appropriate religion" (168).

For Tate, Protestantism is the religious expression of capitalism. It is the religion of the merchant, not the farmer. One can only imagine the bemusement, if not outright hostility, such a thesis would have elicited from Southerners in the ante-bellum period. Farm and plantation life—certainly inland and upriver from the major seaports—would have been unthinkable without the Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists who dominated religious expression throughout the South. Moreover, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that these divines, whether cultured or rustic, saw themselves as upholding the social order.

Nevertheless, our knowledge of the actual religiousness of the South must not blind us to the fact that, historically speaking, Protestantism started out as a revolutionary enterprise. In order for Protestantism—it would be more correct to say, "the Protestantisms"—to arise, long-standing traditions had to fall. Though some reformers were more radical than others—a point to which I shall return later—from Rome's point of view they were all radicals and revolutionaries.

More to the point, the Reformations got going just as Europe was beginning to emerge from the feudal era. From Tate's perspective, the phenomenon of Protestantism was inextricably bound to the wider socio-economic changes that were taking place in Europe. One thing is certain; it is difficult to imagine free-church and non-conformist sects such as Baptists thriving in a thoroughly feudal Europe. And yet, this is precisely what happened in the Old South.

III

According to Tate, religion in the South was an anomalous phenomenon. But this still does not explain what religion has to do with the disintegration of Southern society after the war. To understand this, we must turn to Tate's interpretation of the religious imagination and, in particular, the metaphor of the horse. Tate wrote:

> Religion, when it directs its attention to the horse cropping the blue-grass on the lawn, is concerned with the whole horse, and not with (1) that part of him which he has in common with other horses, or that more general part which he shares with other quadrupeds or with the more general vertebrates; and not with (2) that power of the horse which he shares with horsepower in general, of pushing or pulling another object. Religion pretends to place before us the horse as he is (155-175).

It is the curse of the modern world that we tend to see only half the horse. The modern mind in all of its techno-scientific rigor—and who among us wishes to be thought *unscientific*?—is concerned with the *use* of the horse, how it *works*. That is, it is concerned with the half of the horse that is horsepower. Thus, the most essential element of the modern mind is its capacity for abstraction, our ability to see "that abstract horsepower, ideally, everywhere, infallibly, under other abstract and *half* conditions, works" (157).

Over against this techno-scientific mindset however, there is one that sees the other half of the horse: the *particular* horse that is both alike and distinct from other horses. And yet, it is its distinctiveness that is most arresting. Referring in particular to Bergson, Tate writes, "the horse is just an infinite object, and the more you contemplate him, the more you see how futile it is to pretend that there is anything regular about him" (158).

Thus, Tate spoke of the two "half-religions," which he contrasted with religion proper, that is, the religion of the whole horse. The half-religion of abstract horsepower he dubbed "the American religion," and so it is. It is the animating spirit—half-religious, wholly secular—behind America's onward progress. That it is only a half-religion does not seem to bother many people, least of all America's religious leaders, who seem to be doing quite well by it.

Perceptively, Tate recognized that this dichotomy between the two half-religions is endemic to modern, western society: we are compelled "to vacillate between a self-destroying naturalism and practicality, on the one hand, and a self-destroying mysticism, on the other" (163).

Tate went on to speak of the two halves of the horse as the qualitative half and the quantitative half. During the Middle Ages rationality (the quantitative half) was called upon to defend "the strictly qualitative half of the horse, his special uniqueness as a sensible fact, in a word his image…" (164). Tate's observations are trenchant and merit quotation at length:

> It was both a great discovery and a great calamity when the Europeans found that Reason could be used in another way than the defense of something alien to it. It has always seemed a scandal to us that Scholasticism should try to make rational all those unique qualities of the horse which are spirits and myths and symbols. The men of the Renaissance effectively hushed the scandal up; they said: *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*. Which meant, Throw over the spirits and symbols, which are irrational anyhow, not rationally necessary, and find those quantities in nature which will *work*, the quantities that are barely necessary for work (164).

Ostensibly, then, secularism set in when the rational, quantitative folk discovered there were more productive subjects on which to ply their trade than angels and pinheads. Yet, Tate understood that the real problem was the medieval synthesis itself, a "feat of spiritual unity" to be sure, but one that rested ultimately on "an ineradicable belief in the fundamental evil of nature" (165). The two halves of the horse, when considered precisely as two discrete halves, are incompatible, and the breakdown of the medieval world was the inevitable result of their incompatibility.

Tate also recognized that the "Eastern Church never… [had] to construct a plausible rationality round the supernatural to make it acceptable…" (165). In other words, Orthodoxy is religion of the whole horse. Just so. Tate's mode of expression here, however, and indeed the whole tenor of his essay, belies a certain fatalism about it all, as if "East" and "West" are themselves discrete entities, half-horses treated as wholes: the achievement of the middle ages was "the only kind of unity that the Western mind is capable of" (164).

Yet, this ignores the fact that Scholasticism was a rather late development in the West and that there was a native religion of the whole horse long before the Schoolmen came onto the scene. Let us not forget that the ancient Greeks themselves were very much "Westerners." Nor should we forget that, while in some ways Scholasticism represents a major break with the Greek philosophical tradition, as Pierre Hadot has argued, the older tradition never died out entirely.[3]

Thus, we cannot reduce the matter to a simplistic "Greek East and Latin West" dichotomy. The modern West is the product of many different streams, and even if those in the ascendancy for the last several hundred years are among the least desirable, we are not thereby entitled to write off the "West" as being doomed to a genetically determined future. Nor, I should add, must Westerners become somehow "Eastern" in their outlook—whatever that may mean. It does suggest, however, that the existential "recovery of tradition," to borrow Jaroslav Pelikan's phrase, must entail more than a retreat into some romantic medievalism (to which some Catholic and Tory writers are inclined).[4] We must sink deeper into the soil of Western culture if we are to hit bedrock.

Toward the end of his life, Thomas Aquinas beheld a vision—the details of which are unknown to us—while celebrating the Eucharist. He pronounced everything he had written as so much straw and, as far as we know, never wrote anything else. That Thomas′ vision occurred during the Eucharist is significant, that it led to silence more so. Did he catch a glimpse of the whole horse?

IV

We are now in a much better position to understand what Tate meant when he said that the South lacked an appropriate, that is, feudal religion. The fact that Southern religion no longer represented a vision of the whole meant that it could not, in the final analysis, come to the defense of the Southern way of life:

> They had a religious life, but it was not enough organized with a right mythology. In fact, their rational life was not powerfully united to the religious experience, as it was in medieval society, and they are a fine specimen of the tragic pitfall upon which the Western mind has always hovered. Lacking a rational system for the defense of their religious attitude and its base in a feudal society, they elaborated no rational system what-ever, no full-grown philosophy; so that, when the post-bellum temptations of the devil, who is the exploiter of nature, confronted them, they had no defense. Since there is, in the Western mind, a radical division between the religious, the contemplative, the qualitative, on the one hand, and the scientific, the natural, the practical on the other, the scientific mind always plays havoc with the spiritual life when it is not power-

> fully enlisted in its cause; it cannot be permitted to operate alone (173).

As a result of this deficit, the South was defeated, not on the battlefield, but afterward, for it did not possess a "sufficient faith in its own kind of God" (174). This, in turn, creates a significant problem for the modern Southerner who wants to take hold of his Tradition:

> He cannot fall back on his religion, simply because it was never articulated and organized for him; if he could do this, he would constitute himself a "borer from within," and might hope to effect a secular revolution in his favor…. Since he cannot bore from within, he has left the sole alternative of boring from without. This method is political, active, and in the nature of the case, violent and revolutionary (175).

It is at this point that Tate's analysis breaks down. To be sure, he has put his finger on an important discontinuity within the Southern religious experience, but I am not convinced that he quite understood just what it was he was pointing at. There was, in fact, nothing lacking in the South's mythology—if by mythology we mean the sum of stories and images that gave shape and meaning to the experience of life in the Old South. Her stories were those of the Bible, ancient Greece, and republican Rome, the noblest western civilization has to offer. Nor was she wanting for reasoned public defense of her ways and attitudes—either before or after the war. R. L. Dabney's *Defense of Virginia* is a case in point, though one could certainly argue that

Basil Gildersleeve's *Creed of the Old South* was a nobler and, somehow, more fitting effort.

The point is the South lacked neither the requisite imagery for a vibrant life nor the intellectual resources for a rational defense of it. What was lacking was an ecclesial locus for this way of life *independent* of the socio-economic fabric that could, in the event of the breakdown of the social order, serve as a bulwark, or at least a rallying point, for social cohesion and traditional social relations.

Agrarianism is an inherently sacramental polity, and anyone fully integrated within an agrarian society is a *de facto* sacramentalist, even if his formal theology has little room for such "Romanish superstition." Thus, a Baptist from a little, country church—I cannot speak for those from the First Church of the Big City—will understand instinctively the inherent sacramentality of the table, though he will probably account more significance to dinner on the grounds than to the Lord's Supper, which is, after all, "just a symbol." Typically, Baptist churches go three, sometimes six months without the Lord's Supper—keeps it "special"—but nary a week goes by without a potluck supper or ice-cream social or some other opportunity for "fellowship" around the table.[5]

This inherent sacramentalism was the saving grace of Southern religion. It was this, far more than the eloquence of the well-educated Presbyterians or the fiery broadsides of the revivalists that insulated the South from the creeping liberalism and secularism of Northern religion. Because these folk were tied to the land, in a way that the financier or the wage-laborer were not, they felt in their bones—even if they could not necessarily articulate it—the fundamental importance of the *narrative* of Christianity for the way they lived, and they resisted all attempts to rationalize, de-historicize, or, later, de-mythologize the story. It was the story, after all, that gave meaning to their lives, their labor, and their social relations, even to their meals. To read one's daily life within the narrative of God's mighty acts of creation and redemption is *anamnesis* at a profound level—the *sine qua non* of the sacramental outlook.

To put it another way, the elements that we associate with the "older religiousness" of the South were hypostasized within the social fabric itself and formed a holistic vision of life—a vision of the whole horse, if you will. To the extent that Southern churches were integrated within this social fabric—and they certainly were—their ecclesial life reflected this holistic vision in practice, though not necessarily in theory. And that is the point. Formally and constitutively, they were unable to hypostasize this way of seeing and relating to the world independently of the wider social structure. That is why, when the social structure began to break down, taking traditional social relations with it, Southern churches were unable to resist the decline, for they too were dependent on the structure itself.

By the time those who had been charged with the political and moral leadership of the post-bellum South had sold their souls to commercial interests (importing Jim Crow from Massachusetts in the process) and their first-born males to be sacrificed on the pagan altar of false patriotism in a succession of foreign wars, the South was already starting to experience an internal reconstruction of sorts, which would eventually lead to a full-fledged crisis of faith.

Even though the South remains the last North American holdout of the "Old Time Religion," that religion itself has been irrevocably changed. The transformation of the Southern Baptist Convention into a conventicle of puritanical scolds, now embarrassed to be called either "Southern" or "Baptist," is proof enough.

Southern agrarianism, then, was a sacramental polity practiced by those who were not *formally* sacramentalists. When the socio-economic structure of the South's agrarian-republican polity began to disintegrate under the various influences of reconstruction, industrialization, progressivism, and even contemporary "conservatism," there was little left to sustain the old piety—piety, in Weaver's sense—but appeals to emotion and nostalgia. Or, to put it another way, when the family dinner table had been thoroughly secularized by all the forces of finance capitalism, consumerism, and modernity so often catalogued and lamented, there remained no immovable bulwark that could arrest the process, for the table of the Lord's Supper had already been stripped by a leveling theology that democratized the clergy, disinherited tradition, and abjured "hocus pocus."

V

My reinterpretation of Tate's thesis turns on two crucial distinctions. First is the distinction between piety—in Weaver's sense—and formal doctrine. I am arguing that there existed a fundamental discontinuity between the actual, lived piety of Southern Christians and certain of the formal doctrines and practices that defined them as Protestants, albeit selfconsciously *conservative* Protestants. The second distinction explains the nature of the first: it is the distinction between what A. J. Conyer's called an "incarnational sensitivity" in religion and what I shall call a fully expressed sacramental theology.

In an article entitled, "The Real Old Time Religion," Conyers delineated those elements of Southern religion that have traditionally distinguished it from Northern expressions of Christianity. While nodding toward Weaver's analysis of nominalism and realism, he finally settled on the distinction between an incarnational sensitivity and Gnosticism as dispositive.[6] In its most generic sense Gnosticism is a formal tendency, dualistic in nature, which places the emphasis in religion on the inward and subjective and tends to deprecate the outward and material. To a significant degree, this definition of Gnosticism coincides with Tate's description of a "self-defeating mysticism." The opposite of Gnosticism would be the materialism of the scientist and industrialist, where all of the emphasis is placed on the outward, the visible, and the testable.

An incarnational sensitivity, on the other hand, holds the two halves of the horse together in a unified vision. Conyers described it this way:

> A theology that tends to remember, along with its hope for salvation, that the world was created good, and that God became flesh, is not likely to err in the fashion of the ancient gnostics. That is, it is not likely to promote a hatred of the world and an excessive distrust of humanity. Its doctrine of a fallen humanity does not lead to revolutionary hopes for an alternate world.

Significantly, however, Conyers traced this incarnational approach to religious life directly back to the middle ages, and he emphasized the influence of Thomas Aquinas, in particular, on such Southern Protestant luminaries as James Pettigru Boyce. He then made an extremely telling comment. In describing the influence of natural theology on and within the various denominations, he wrote: "The Roman Catholics … naturally reflect the interplay of natural and revealed theology that has long been a hallmark of Catholic thought."

The key word here for our purposes is "naturally." The respect for natural theology, which is an essential element of this "incarnational sensitivity," was transmitted to the South from the Middle Ages via the thought of Reformers such as Calvin and Wesley. In a very real sense, Southerners received this theological perspective second hand. Contemporary Roman Catholic theology, on the other hand, was a natural reflection of what had always been a central element of her thought.

Conyers contrasted the incarnational sensibility of Southern religion with the "gnostic inclination of the New England Puritans and their Unitarian successors," and cited the influence of Scottish Common-Sense Realism as the primary reason for this difference. I would argue, however, that the South's agrarian social and economic system had much more to do with it than any putative influence of philosophical epistemology, Scottish or otherwise. More importantly, Conyers failed to note that there were strong gnostic tendencies within Southern Protestantism as well. They certainly did not dominate Southern religion, nor did they cause the South's churches to veer from the path of doctrinal orthodoxy as happened so frequently in the North, but the tendencies were there nonetheless, and they manifested themselves precisely at those points where Southern religion differed most dramatically from the religion of feudal Europe.

Though Luther and Calvin—each in his own way—tried to maintain a "high" view of the sacraments, preserving *some* concept of the Real Presence, Southern Christians—Presbyterians no less than Baptists—held to a Zwinglian view of the sacraments. Even the Episcopalians were decidedly low church. The belief that the eucharistic elements are neither the actual Body and Blood of Christ, nor even an objective means of grace, but an outward sign of the faith of the believer implies a dualistic contraposition of matter and intellect, a "gnostic" conception of religion as a subjective, interior state.

This is not to suggest that Communion was unimportant for Southerners. In fact, it was often the subject of heated polemic. But, from a Zwinglian perspective, that importance was ultimately *subjective*. This explains the depth of emotion displayed in debates over the issue of closed communion. Many Christians were personally offended and deeply hurt by the practice of some churches—most commonly Baptist—which refused communion to non-members. Since communion was seen as an outward sign of one's own subjective faith, just as much as a sign of God's love, this refusal was tantamount to judging the inward state of the believer. Methodists, in particular, took great umbrage to the practice. For most Southerners, then, communion was neither an objective means of grace nor yet an act that was somehow constitutive of the gathered community as church; it, like baptism, was a public display of an essentially inward spiritual disposition.

VI

At every turn the South's incarnational sensitivity was undercut by its professed theology. Indeed, these gnosticising tendencies were manifest above all in ecclesiology and the question of church governance. Southern society was an avowedly Christian society. In *The Mind of the Master Class* the Genoveses noted that even those who, for one reason or another, did not avail themselves of formal church membership, often supported religious efforts monetarily and in other ways as well. Everyone seemed to think that religion was a good idea and that it was, in some way, the backbone of society.

Moreover, the Southerners who joined churches took membership seriously. Denominational identity could be quite strong and denominational infighting could be quite intense—though it was usually most vitriolic in the West. Calvinists—both Baptist and Presbyterian—went at the Arminian Methodists hammer and tong. But, then, there were Methodist divines who could give as good as they got.

And yet, the folks in the pews were only prepared to put up with so much infighting. If they thought a preacher had gone too far in excoriating an opponent or casting aspersions on someone's character, congregants would make their displeasure known. Fact is, people often attended churches other than their own, especially if a noted preacher was in town. Some folks would attend two or even three churches of different denominations on the same Sunday. Only the issue of closed Communion seemed to strike a raw nerve with folks.

In an article entitled, "Northern and Southern Varieties of American Evangelicalism in the Nineteenth Century," Samuel Hill provides us with some important clues to understanding this phenomenon.[7] In delineating the differences between Northern and Southern Evangelicals, Hill cites two things that are particularly important to our enquiry. The first is that Southern Evangelicalism mirrored the "regional penchant for localism." (It is important to note here that Hill is comparing apples to apples; that is, comparing Evangelicals with Evangelicals rather than comparing Southern Evangelicals with Northern Puritans or Unitarians, as Southerners are so often wont to do.) Southern Evangelicals were just as revivalistic as their Northern counterparts, but, says Hill, the Camp Meeting became all but extinct in the 1840s and was replaced by local revivals that were a "function of the people in settled clusters."

Though Hill does not venture a causal link between the South's agrarian society and the manner in which Evangelicalism evolved within the South—in the article, at least, he remains agnostic on the subject—I shall venture where he fears to tread and assert that it was precisely the South's agrarian socio-economic culture that helped mold Southern religion in the direction of localism. This is how Hill summarizes the situation:

> While we balk before the issue of cause and effect, we may be quite straightforward about the conditions accompanying theological matters. The North's greater preference for comprehensiveness, system, and organicism

> marked its revivals, especially in the period 1830-1860. The southern Protestant proclivity for "whole pieces" and "separate bites" characterized the revivalism so popular there (280-281).

But now consider Hill's conclusion: "No direct link existed in the South between the conversion experience and a systematic understanding of a social ethic" (281). (Allen Tate is somewhere nodding his head in agreement.) This leads me to the second point made by Hill. While Northern Evangelicalism became increasingly outward in its direction, manifesting itself in social movements and moral crusades, Southern Evangelicalism turned increasingly inward:

> A private introspectiveness that even the colonial Puritans had never known became the hallmark of southern righteousness. Organizing the inner life, responding to inward convictions and compunctions, took over as the lineaments of faithfulness.... Beyond doubt southern faith was expressed by the southern faithful in the public sphere. Southern evangelicals knew the sweetness of fellowship with others, they established schools and colleges, they organized reform societies, they gave leadership in the public domain, and they agonized over slavery, slaves, and their own connections with both institution and people. But when southern evangelicals thought about or spoke of religion directly, they meant the inner life (278).

Of course, as Hill himself notes, this inwardness was offset to a degree by a thriving, even gregarious social life. But this social life was rooted in the South's agrarian social relations. It is unfair—and incorrect—to say that Northerners had an organic sense of society while Southerners did not. Southern society was certainly organic, and Southerners had a strong self-consciousness in this respect; the point is, they did not get this consciousness from their religion.

Now all of this has a direct bearing on the question of denominationalism and the Church. Denominational lines in the South were drawn clearly in theory, but, as we noted, were not so consistently observed in practice. The reason for this is precisely the propensity for inwardness that Hill describes. Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians all believed that they were right on the issues that divided them, but few were willing to claim a monopoly on the Holy Spirit or salvation. Those who did were not well received by the population at large. Southerners were strongly attached to their individual churches and denominations, but when they spoke of the Church—with a capital "C"—they meant the "invisible Church" made up of all true believers.

The Genoveses devoted an entire chapter to this subject, and it makes for fascinating reading. Commenting upon St Cyprian's dictum, "Outside the Church there is no salvation," Thomas Smyth of Charleston insisted, "But mark what the church is. It is not the Episcopalian, Baptist, or Presbyterian. The Church is a company of men who have received the Spirit" (455). The Presbyterian John Girardeau opined, "My denominational creed teaches me that there are other sheep not of the Presbyterian fold; and the older I get the more heartily do I believe it; hence as I grow in grace, I am growing in denominationalism" (456).

Here we see what is perhaps the single greatest difference between the religion of the Old South and the religion of feudal Europe. There were no denominations in medieval Europe. Unless one was prepared to hike into the mountains to find a group of Cathars or Bogomils, one had to deal with the Catholic Church, because that was the only game in town. More to the point, the Catholic Church considered herself to be *the* Body of Christ on earth. To be outside of the Roman Church was to be outside of Christ himself.

VII

The relationship of the Catholic Church to the social and political structures of medieval Europe makes for a tale of labyrinthine complexity. Certainly, for much of the period the Church was much too intertwined with the feudal system for her own good. I am thinking here especially of the practice of investiture. Indeed, many of the Gregorian Reforms of the eleventh century were geared specifically toward such practices and ultimately aimed at greater independence for the Church. Such reforms notwithstanding, however, the Roman Church remained mired in political intrigues, providing ample fodder for the Reformers of the sixteenth century and beyond. Cardinals Wolsey, Mazarin, and Richelieu are not remembered today for their sermons, theological acumen, or personal piety.

In spite of all of these intrigues, however, the Catholic Church remained an independent and transnational institution. As such, she was able to reproduce the social structure within herself and endow it with eternal significance, regardless of what was happening in society at large. But an invisible "Church," such as Southerners confessed, was by definition, incapable of incarnating any social structure—traditional or otherwise. This is why I said earlier that Southern religion was incapable of providing an ecclesial locus for the South's traditional social relations *independent* of the secular social order. The South had innumerable churches, but no Church, around which she could rally.

To complicate matters, the denominations into which Southern Christianity was divided each had radically different polities and structures, meaning that it was difficult, if not impossible, for any one of them to claim to be *the* incarnation of the South's social order. Everyone agrees that the South had a highly articulated social structure, though it was nowhere near as rigid as that of old England. The New World was, after all, settled by second, third, and fourth sons, not to mention a significant number of indentured servants. The ready possibility of social mobility combined with a liberal political tradition to create a highly complex society that managed to be democratic, republican, and hierarchical all at the same time.

Southern Christians in their various denominations could—and often did—interpret their own ecclesial polities in terms of the prevailing secular order—and vice versa. If one wanted to emphasize the "democratic" element of democratic republicanism, then the Free Churches offered a democratic approach to Christianity. Baptists, in particular, saw themselves as embodying the democratic spirit of the new nation in a special way, and this self-perception persisted well into the twentieth century. In what remains one of the most famous and important Baptist orations in American history, George W. Truett—pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Baptist World Alliance—addressed an assembly of notables from the steps of the U. S. Capitol Building in 1923. He not only praised the separation of church and state, he actually took credit for it. That is, he claimed that Baptists were uniquely responsible for this political doctrine. Indeed, I was reared to believe that we would not even have a Bill of Rights had Virginia Baptists not used popular preacher John Leland to more or less blackmail James Madison into supporting it.

On the other hand, if one were more inclined to stress the country's republicanism over its democratic aspects, one might take solace in the good order of Presbyterian governance. Still others, more concerned with maintaining the South's hierarchical social structure than with political structures *per se*, could point to the Catholic and Episcopal churches as the very ecclesiastical image of good social order.

Not surprisingly, these religio-political convictions manifested themselves in inter-denominational polemics. The Genoveses noted that while an Episcopal bishop from Alabama could excoriate the Disciples of Christ for their individualism, "where every man can be a preacher and every woman if she claims the privilege" (674-5), Campbellites themselves stressed the communal aspects of their religion and, in turn, excoriated others with the same charge of individualism. And of course, more than one divine criticized papists and Episcopalians for their monarchical tendencies. Indeed, Baptists criticized Methodists for retaining bishops. Such offices were not only unbiblical, they were undemocratic as well!

All of this tended to underscore the fact that Protestantism by its very nature was incapable of providing a coherent vision of social organization. There were as many theories as there were denominations, and all of them were rooted in what we have already identified as an inherently revolutionary movement. The Genoveses put it this way:

> Protestantism's inherent tendencies toward radical individualism and democratization posed a direct threat to the South's slaveholding social order…. After the War, Father J. J. O'Connell of South Carolina taunted Protestants who wanted not only the right of private judgment and other Reformation doctrines but also a patriarchal social order and a Christian slave society: "It is only under Catholic governments, where the church can regulate the relative duties between the servant and the master, that slavery can exist as a Christian institution" (659-660).

Though Tate would have surely abjured any return to a slave society, he would, no doubt, have agreed with the sentiment underlying Fr O'Connell's words. A hierarchical society—as any agrarian society must surely be—requires a hierarchical religion; one that has the capacity—in Tate's words once again—to "make her special secular system the inevitable and permanently viable one."

VIII

Tate claimed that, because of its inability to grasp the whole horse, the West had a "special notion of tradition," that is, as "a fact that must be constantly defended. This defense is what we call Dogma."[8] The lack of such dogma constitutes the core of his indictment against the Old South. But the criticism is misplaced, for the South lacked neither apologists nor—at least after the War started—even a sense of her own exceptionalism.

On the contrary, the lack of a "rational system" was (and is) to the South's credit. The real problem was the failure to confess a *theological* link between themselves and the biblical figures they saw as their exemplars. As sacramentalists without a sacramental theology, their professed religion was incapable of moving beyond mere psychological remembrance—even if that remembrance was tightly woven into the social fabric.[9] *Anamnesis*, in its fullest sense, means to "re-present" or "make present," and it was the lack of this spiritual potency that finally doomed the Bible-infused culture of the South.

Tate's offhand remark that the "Eastern Church" had no need of tradition-defending dogma should have prompted a more thorough reflection. What has allowed Orthodox Christianity, *sans* dogma (in Tate's sense), to survive intact, doctrinally and liturgically, in spite of hundreds of years of Arab and Ottoman oppression and more than seventy years of militant atheist persecution is not the potency of her myths, for they are largely the same stories once held and since abandoned in the West. Rather, it is the conviction that the Incarnation is an ongoing concern, that the Church is literally the Body of Christ, the sacramental manifestation of his first *and* second comings, and not merely a covenanted society or, worse, a voluntary "association" of like-minded people.[10]

With this correction in mind, we are able to fully appreciate the real significance of Tate's criticism. Southerners, then as now, *acted* as if "the ends of man" required nothing more than politics, even if they did not really *believe* it in their heart of hearts. That is, they professed their sincerest belief in God and in a biblically ordered society, but lacking a sacramental ecclesiology, there was no place left for this belief to repose once the social fabric had been torn asunder. Southerners cried God for their "altars and firesides," but their houses had been burnt by Sherman, leaving only the scorched chimneys as a reminder of those once-hallowed hearths, and with her altars long since stripped, there was nothing left but politics. That Southern churches themselves (black and white) would become instruments of politics was inevitable.

But the solution to man's deepest longings—and to society's deepest problems—is not political, and Tate knew that, which is why he was somewhat guarded about the future prospects for a traditional society such as the South:

> The Southerner is faced with the paradox: He must use an instrument, which is political, and so unrealistic and pretentious that he cannot believe in it, to re-establish a private, self-contained, and essentially spiritual life. I say that he must do this; but that remains to be seen.

It is the word, "must," in this passage that gives the game away. It is the proof of Tate's fatalism, which is as dangerous as any materialistic determinism. Why *must* Southerners, or any other traditionally minded people, rely solely or even principally on politics? Because the "Western mind" is incapable of seeing the whole horse? "For what if some did not believe? Shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid: Yea, let God be true, but every man a liar…" (Rom 3.3-4).

Disfigured though it may be, the Christianity of the West has deeper roots than either the Reformation or Scholasticism. Regeneration, therefore, is not only possible it is essential if anything like a traditional, agrarian society is to grow from the ruins of Western civilization. It is precisely for this reason that I have, in choosing the title for this inaugural issue, reversed the terms of Ransom's essay, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate." Admit-ting that "The South at last is to be physically reconstructed," Ransom went on to insist that "… it will be fatal if the South should conceive it as her duty to be regenerated and get her spirit reborn with a totally different orientation toward life."[11] But Tate saw far more clearly than Ransom the inherent weakness in the religion that under gird Southern piety as well as the futility of politics as a response to what are, essentially, spiritual questions.

I should probably emphasize at this point that the "South" here is merely a cipher for any traditionally minded, agrarian society, and what is said concerning her could well be applied to agrarians in rural Vermont or Wisconsin or California. Certainly, each of these areas has its own, unique cultural inheritance, and I would expect the inhabitants of each to feel about their homes as I do about the South—that it is the best place on earth—but the threats that secularism and her brood (finance capitalism, industrialization, socialism, militant nationalism, globalism, etc.) pose to the soul of man know no bounds. The threats are ubiquitous; the response must be adequate to the challenge.

What is required is a religion that is at once universal and particular, capable of defining man *as man*, yet at the same time respecting *this man* or that as a unique and unrepeatable bearer of a particular culture, the summation of the genius of a certain people. But only a religion that is sacramental, that is to say, incarnational in *theory and practice*, can do this, for it is precisely the sacramental principle that celebrates the universal and eternal as something concrete and particular. Only a religion that is capable of incarnating *both* the right *and* leftward impulses of the human spirit in concrete, local communities will be able to engender and sustain traditional social relations over the long haul. All of which is to say that what is wanted is the Orthodox Catholicism of the first millennium, the original deposit of the West's squandered spiritual capital, the religion of the whole horse.

True spiritual regeneration comes from God, of course, but it requires human cooperation (*synergeia*). To be sure, we cannot go back to a feudal economy, and medievalism in religion is but a romantic fantasy. But perhaps, if we were to begin to build strong, local communities, and do so with an explicitly incarnational, even sacramental, intention, then we would turn the fallow ground, and the seeds of what Weaver called the "Older Religiousness" would begin to take root and sprout once again…

And this torn earth would quicken into shouting
Beneath the feet of ragged bands.[12]

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[*] Originally presented as a talk for the 2009 Scholars' Conference of the Abbeville Institute at Lynchburg, Virginia. The paper has been substantially revised for the present publication.

[1] Twelve Southerners, I'll Take my Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (NY: Peter Smith, 1951).

[2] Richard Weaver, "The Older Religiousness in the South," in *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver,* George Curtis and James Thompson eds. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 134-146 [Originally in *The Sewanee Review* 51 (1943), 237-249]. A. J. Conyers, "The *Real* Old Time Religion," *The Southern Partisan* 23.3, 16-20; 26.

[3] See Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, Michael Chase, tr. (Cambridge: Harvard/Bellknap, 2004), esp. ch. 11, "Eclipses and Recurrences of the Ancient Concept of Philosophy," 253-270.

[4] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), esp. 23-40.

[5] The Greek word for fellowship, *koinonia*, was used in the early church to refer both to both the general fellowship among believers and also specifically to eucharistic communion.

[6] Care should be taken at this point, for "Gnosticism" is a difficult, if not impossible, term to define because no single, ancient heresy used the word to describe themselves or their ideas. It is not a word I would have chosen myself. For Conyers the word generally denotes a tendency to deprecate the material and particular in favor of the abstract and immaterial.

[7] Samuel S. Hill, "Northern and Southern Varieties of American Evangelicalism in the Nineteenth Century," in Noll, Bebbington, and Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 275-289.

[8] "Remarks" (*I'll Take my Stand*), 163-4.

[9] Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve, founder of the classics department at Johns Hopkins and, thus, the veritable father of classical studies in the United States, tackled the problem of historical memory and comparison in his moving essay, "A Southerner in the Peloponnesian War." Noting that contemporary literature was all but cut off from the Confederacy on account of the Federal blockade, Southerners were forced to return to the old standbys, the Bible and the classics of antiquity. Thus, they read their

own story in the pages of Thucydides and Aristophanes as well as Jeremiah and First Samuel. Yet, in spite of the natural tendency to make historical comparisons, Gildersleeve wrote, "Situations may recur, sayings may recur, but no characters come back. Nature always breaks her mould" (77). In other words, no two wars, no two epochs are ever really alike, which is true enough and which should serve as a caution both to historians and to politicians, who are forever fighting the last war. But for Christians, good history must inevitably make for bad theology, "for when God so wills, the order of nature is overcome." It is of the essence of Christian sacramentalism that in God's time characters do not have to "come back"; they are contemporaneous. See Gildersleeve's *The Creed of the Old South 1865-1915* (Baltimore: The John's Hopkins Press, 1915), 55-103.

[10] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.) The Genoveses point out that Southern Protestants were forced to balance the individualism inherent in their theology with the need to maintain traditional social relations, thus posing "the daunting question of how to tame what was beginning to look like a permanent revolution" (650). This, in turn, led to tensions between the more traditional Episcopalians and Presbyterians and the more congregational Baptists and Campbellites. More importantly, however, Protestant individualism not only inhibited strong social bonds laterally, across space, but *across time*.

[11] From, *I'll Take my Stand*, 22.

[12] Donald Davidson, "Lee in the Mountains, 1865-1870," in *Lee in the Mountains and Other Poems* (New York: Scribner's, 1949), 3-7 (6).