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Judgment And Grace In Dixie: Southern Faiths From Faulkner To Elvis



Synopsis

Religion has permeated nearly every aspect of modern southern culture, with results that range from portraits of Jesus on black velvet to the soul-stirring orations of Martin Luther King Jr. In *Judgment and Grace in Dixie*, Charles Reagan Wilson makes a lively appraisal of religion's influence on such expressions of regional life as literature, music, and folk art, as well as on such public spectacles as football games and beauty pageants. Wilson's focus is on popular religion—evangelical Protestantism as embraced at the grassroots level, where distinctions between the sacred and secular are blurred and belief in the supernatural remains strong. As he traces the development and meaning of popular religion and pop culture, Wilson ranges widely across a spiritual landscape rich in iconic accumulations of people, places, events, and artifacts—church fans and Elvis Presley memorabilia, the painting of Howard Finster and the songs of Hank Williams, the Scopes trial and the death of Bear Bryant.

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Customer Reviews

Wilson (editor of the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, LJ 7/89) examines popular religious icons, symbols, and rituals of Southern culture in this loosely linked collection of essays. Part 1 focuses on Protestant Evangelism, the Lost Cause, and Southern civil religion. Part 2 looks at creative religious expressions in country music, popular visual arts, and literature. Part 3 deals with such aspects of popular culture as the iconography of Elvis, the significance of beauty queens, and sacred Southern space. The author feels that attention to these popular manifestations promotes a better

understanding of the uniqueness of this region and its people. Wilson writes in a clear and entertaining style with insight and sympathy. He understands and explains the pervasive religious mindset of the South. Recommended for public and academic libraries. C. Robert Nixon, MLS, Lafayette, Ind. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Wilson, a University of Mississippi professor of history and southern studies and coeditor of The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, argued in *Baptized in Blood* (1980) that southerners constructed a powerful civil religion after the Civil War by clothing the cause lost and way of life ended by that conflict in the trappings of the region's religious beliefs. In these 12 essays, he examines changes in this civil religion since the 1920s and the current role of civil and popular religion in the region's culture and creative expression. Wilson's subjects include visionary art, preoccupation with death in country music, Faulkner, Elvis, Bear Bryant, and beauty contests. Librarians will appreciate his argument that religious fundamentalism was "a major obstacle to a widespread acceptance of a book culture," but the Bible the fundamentalists sought to protect "played an enormous role in fostering creativity." Oral tradition in the South, Wilson suggests, has been well studied; he urges attention to the visual symbols and icons animating southern religion and culture for insights into the "worldview of the region's people." Mary Carroll

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