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African Americans Speak to Spectacle Lynchings

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Donald Mathews’s “The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice” both describes southern lynching as a lived interpretation of Christianity and claims a role for the religious study of lynching. Relying largely on historiography, Mathews contends that white southerners created this religion and ignored obvious parallels between lynched black men and the death of Jesus on the cross. But missing from this and other interpretations is a key voice: that of contemporary black evangelical pastors. These ministers were closer to the crime scenes, the families left behind, and the constant terror of finding one’s self facing the wrath of white murderers, and they used their experiences to interpret the killings in a way that their parishioners and denominational paper readers could understand. Had Mathews seen their accounts, he would have found a different exegesis. Black Baptist and Methodist ministers contended that lynch mobs, and indeed all white segregationists, were not Christian and instead were in league with the devil. There was no religion at the lynching tree, they argued, only evil.

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My research into early twentieth-century African American denominational newspapers has revealed a willingness of these authors to understand Christianity in such a way that white lynchers (and indeed white segregationists in general) fell outside the category of “believers.”¹ Black evangelical writers labeled these white Southerners not just as “un-Christian” but as anti-Christian and without religion altogether. Black Baptists and Methodists, who comprised a majority of black religious voices in the South at the time, could make these allegations because they embraced a definition of Christianity that stressed the importance of racial equality and brotherhood while also understanding that adherence to traditional Protestant doctrines was crucial for salvation. Indeed, for these writers, the universal brotherhood of all humans was as important a doctrine as the notion of an inerrant bible or the virgin birth.

At its most basic, the resulting African American evangelical notion of the church was a community of believers in Jesus Christ. White southerners who lynched placed themselves outside the church, black evangelicals argued. They did not follow the words and deeds of Christ; therefore these particular whites were not Christian. This view of lynching, expressed in numerous editions of interwar denominational papers, allows us to look at what blacks believed, rather than letting white voices—whether in the sources or in the scholarship—speak for them. Black evangelicals wrote the lynchers and their complicit southern whites right out of the Christian church. Christianity for black evangelicals could not be altered in a way that

would justify the brutal murder of members of their race. It was a simple unchanging truth, and therefore those who did not acknowledge this truth were not followers of Christ.

In their descriptions and condemnations, we begin to witness African American pastors wrestling with the sort of religious teleology and social scientific arguments of religion as a progressive force that white and black historians have struggled with in later depictions of this era. To have lived and preached during this period, especially in the early twentieth century, was to have watched modernists and fundamentalists battle over the definition of Protestant Christianity and to have heard the common assumption by both sides that Christianity made humans better, whether corporately or individually.² But to witness a lynch mob was either to watch a failure of Christianity to improve human actions or to see a godless group operate without fear of punishment. For black Baptists and Methodists, the former was impossible, so the latter was the logical conclusion. This conclusion was a radical rewriting of the rules of Christianity. It excluded the sinners, gave as evidence the evils of lynching and the attendant evils of silence, and demanded a worldly change in order to achieve an otherworldly reward.

This notion of lynching as the rejection of religion need not work as a counter to Mathews. Instead the two can coexist together when one begins to examine more fully the words of African American groups not represented in his original set of sources. Indeed, his goal was to engage with the historiography, not necessarily the primary sources. Mathews is right that some contemporary observers

(Walter White, for example) saw a likeness of Christ when black men were lynched, and James Cone has argued that while black (and white) preachers “lacked the imagination,” contemporary “artists and writers” saw Christ hanging from trees, bridges, and poles in Dixie.³ But this imagery is almost entirely absent from contemporary African American religious papers. White’s interpretation, like that of W.E. B. Du Bois, sought to reframe the acts of violence as analogous to the crucifixion, but in so doing, both White and Du Bois, and indeed Cone as a later commentator, assumed the lynch mob embraced a mutual foundation of Christianity.⁴ The actors “on the ground” engaged with the spectacle of lynching differently.

That absence in black religious sources of an acknowledgment of a white religion of lynching should give us pause as historians about imposing it on contemporary actors. For African American evangelicals of the time, the central concern was not linking the lynched body to the body of Jesus on the cross. Instead, the first goal was to convince whites that Christianity saw all humans as brothers in Christ and to lynch meant to defy the word of god prohibiting murder of a human being. The man or woman who hung from the tree was a human being, first and foremost—a father, son, nephew, brother, mother, sister, daughter, aunt—and the first task of the black community was to embrace and mourn that individual and his or her survivors.

Once the victim’s body had been buried, black denominational writers turned to their printing presses to remind whites that the religion they took great pains to profess demanded universal brotherhood before god. But because black

preachers had to engage in this reminder every time a person was lynched was proof for them that southern whites had no religion at all. For most of these pastors, Christianity was the only “true” religion, so to lack Christianity was to lack any religion. Despite the white South’s protestations that it was Christian, black ministers declared that actions spoke louder than words—the white South was irreligious.

While it is only speculation, black ministers likely would have pointed to a 1904 exchange between a white minister and a lynch mob as proof of white depravity and irreligion. As the Reverend Harmon Hodges attempted to halt a lynching in Statesboro, Georgia, his pleas for mercy for the two African American men, Paul Reed and Will Cato, already convicted of murdering his brother and his brother’s family, were met with derision. A voice in the crowd cried out, “We don’t want religion, we want blood.”⁵ The anonymous Statesboro heckler affirms what African American evangelical ministers would contend was overwhelmingly white public opinion, not a random outlier. These black ministers indicted white southerners who professed faith: whites were not interested in religion, nor were they Christian. In the view of African American evangelicals of the day, whites did not want religion, to paraphrase the Georgia man’s exclamation, they wanted blood.

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1. See Mary Beth Mathews, *Truth Runs on a Narrow Gauge: African American Evangelicals Between the Wars* (forthcoming). ↵
2. Matthew Bowman has observed that modernists were just as much belligerents in the fundamentalist/modernist debates as were the fundamentalists. See Matthew Bowman, *The Urban Pulpit: New York City and the Fate of Liberal Evangelicalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). ↵
3. James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 94–95. ↵
4. For an extended discussion of Du Bois and lynching, see Edward J. Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 134–180. ↵
5. Quoted in Mary Elizabeth Swetnam Mathews, *Rethinking Zion: How the Print Media Place Fundamentalism in the South*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), 11. See also “Without Sanctuary,” http://withoutsanctuary.org/pics_55_text.html (accessed 27 March 2015). ↵

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