The US South may indeed be a “molting” region, as Sheldon Hackney has put it, “constantly disappearing, only to be succeeded by another South, also distinct but distinct in another way” (390). But from the time evangelical Protestantism took hold in the region in the mid-1700s, it has undeniably remained a place of widespread religious practice and deeply held beliefs, and demographic research continues to show that people in the US South are profoundly religious. In 2007, eighty-two percent of Mississippians said that religion was “very important in their lives,” and the percentage of those surveyed in all the other Southern states followed closely behind, most well above the national average of fifty-six percent (Pew). The same survey showed similar results for belief in God, frequency of prayer, and attendance at religious services. The Bible Belt remains an apt nickname for the region.¹

Though southern studies was already an established field, the study of religion in the South did not begin in earnest until the 1960s, when geographers, sociologists, historians, and literary critics began a concerted examination of the region, which writer Flannery O’Connor called “Christ haunted” (44). By the early 1970s much

¹Few question the existence of the U.S. South as a distinct cultural region, but its exact geographical boundaries have shifting definitions. This discussion treats the region broadly, including the 11 former Confederate states as well as the “border states” Kentucky, West Virginia, Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware. With its deep ties to Southern culture, Oklahoma is sometimes also added to this mix.
of this work was being done by historians, and the scholarship quickly expanded, resulting in the landmark 1984 publication of the *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*. If Kevin Schulz and Paul Harvey’s recent observation that religion has always been “everywhere in American history, but nowhere in American historiography” is true, and it is “the task of American religious historians to make sure ‘there is a there there’” (132), scholars of religion in the South moved quickly to and remain at the forefront of this work.

But these historians’ methods have grown increasingly complex, resulting in new generations of scholarship that more fully explore the nature of religion in Southern life. With the advent of social history in the 1960s and the growing focus on “lived religion,” their work is now providing a richer sense of the historical diversity of attitudes and beliefs of blacks and whites across denominations and from the plateaus of the Appalachians to the plains of the Deep South. In a spate of recent works exploring the Reconstruction period up to the emerging civil rights struggle of the 1950s, the result has been a focus on diverse evangelical responses to racial and Southern identity and to endemic social issues; the relationship of religion to the material conditions of believers’ daily lives, including their experience of work and class status; and the experience of women of both races. According to this developing narrative, a broad mix of evangelical beliefs and practices fueled not only a rich expressive culture, but also episodes of interracial religious practice that interrupted and challenged the ravages of segregation and social justice work targeted at racial injustice but also working class struggle and gender imbalance.

In all this work, these historians see a complexity in evangelicalism under-recognized by earlier generations of scholars. As the study of religion in the South emerged in the 1960s and 70s, key works appeared from scholars like John B. Boles and Samuel S. Hill, Jr., on the origins of white Southern evangelicalism in the antebellum South and its persistence into the twentieth century. In addition to stressing the anti-intellectualism and anti-elitism inherent in this evangelicalism, one central conclusion of their and other early scholarship was that its emphasis on personal salvation and life after death led to unquestioning complicity with developing social hierarchies and discrimination, including slavery and Jim Crow and, later, the backlash against the civil rights movement. The 1984 publication of the *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South* signaled the first full flourishing in the study of religion in the South, while at the same time cementing the focus on this perceived effect of evangelicalism in the region. As historian Paul Harvey noted in 1997, historians’ central view until that time had been that in Southern evangelicalism “the focused moment of salvation” had formed “the bedrock of southern religious belief and practice” and “stifled any social ethic, leaving southern churches captive to racism and a dogmatic literalist theology” (*Redeeming* 1). But Harvey and fellow scholars of religion in the South have been actively rewriting this
history. As Harvey puts his thesis in Freedom’s Coming, “If southern formal theology generally sanctified the regnant hierarchies, evangelical belief and practice also subtly undermined the dominant tradition” (4).

The result of this exploration is new stories of and perspectives on the differences in Southerners’ lived religion—with a corresponding adjustment of method. As they tell the story from the ground up, these historians rely especially on individual persons’ stories through diaries, autobiographies, correspondence, and, in some cases, oral histories. For some time, in the study of religion in the South, the view seemed to be that, to tweak Harvey and Schulz’s phrase, religion was everywhere but only somewhere. Many previous histories of Southern religion of the late 1800s through the mid-twentieth century focused in large part on institutional records and newspapers of the dominant denominations, which often meant the neglect of other stories, even of countercultural voices within these organizations’ own ranks. In more recent works like Harvey’s, in addition to using the records of the denominations, it is very significantly often through the accounts of a wide range of practitioners themselves that the story of evangelical diversity emerges.

Evangelical Diversity, Interracialism, and Prophetic Voices

Harvey’s goal in Freedom’s Coming is to develop a larger narrative of the ways that black and white evangelicals from the Civil War through the mid-twentieth century engaged in religious cultural exchange and cooperated in numerous organizations and causes that laid the groundwork for the civil rights movement. In tracing this history of race relations, Harvey establishes the roots of the mid-twentieth century struggles for social justice in earlier Southern evangelical Populist, Progressive, liberal, and radical ideas and action. He also charts how interracial cultural exchange took place in religious expression—in common beliefs, folk practices, and worship and music styles—particularly in Pentecostalism as it emerged and spread across the South.

Harvey’s history indicates that where blacks and whites did cooperate, it was often shared religious sentiment and practice that brought them together. And his work demonstrates that interracial exchange in Southern religion did not just occur in the upper echelons of denominational leadership, among the urban middle class, or in the denominational women’s auxiliary groups that were usually less conservative and more reform-minded than their male counterparts. It also sprang up in factory villages and across the countryside where evangelical political organizers and itinerant and lay preachers, including Holiness and Pentecostals, brought a vision of God’s kingdom on earth to farmers and working class laborers of both races. Though this racial interchange occurred, as Harvey puts it, in “liminal moments” (3) and was often only temporary, freedom’s coming was in good measure predicated
on this cultural melding and “the constant struggle of black and white prophets who formed a southern evangelical counterculture of Christian interracialism” (2). Though “theological racism” (2) was preached from Southern pulpits, it was not the only evangelical message, and ultimately it did not win the day.

Harvey’s great gift is revisiting existing research and unearthing new material to meticulously, at close range, illustrate in individual lives and local communities the contradictions within evangelicalism and the openings for racial interchange in the region. While his overall narrative of interracialism and evangelical diversity is often obscured as he combs through the detailed evidence, he offers a complex picture in which the lives and work of Christians involved in social transformation speak for themselves.

Early in *Freedom’s Coming*, Harvey establishes that in the late nineteenth century, racial segregation in religious practices proceeded very quickly. This was the result of whites’ racist formal theology and continued allegiance to biracial but internally segregated congregations, as well as blacks’ newfound freedom to worship in their own self-determining congregations and to develop, in true Protestant fashion, numerous institutional and denominational stripes of their own. By 1880, the schism was complete and interracialism was a “virtual impossibility in the context of southern apartheid” (27). The situation only worsened as white Redemption politicians—claiming God would “redeem” whites from the threat of control by Northern and black politicians—ascended to power in the 1870s, Jim Crow laws increasingly codified racial hierarchy and separation, and the practice of lynching posed a daily threat to black men throughout the region. As in all his work, Harvey meticulously and compellingly documents these developments through a variety of sources, including sermons, articles, and autobiographical accounts of leaders and lay people, both black and white and both male and female.

By the early 1900s, Progressives and Populists were actively pursuing their goals in the South, but with limited success. Harvey details the activity of the late nineteenth-century Farmers’ Alliance and other Populist movements in the South, which focused on a “rural social gospel” “tied integrally to the evangelical cultures of the region,” with political meetings that took on the “passion of religious revivals and camp meetings” and included many Populists organizers coming out of smaller evangelical denominations like the Disciples of Christ, Free Will Baptists, and Methodist Protestant Church (49). But the limited interracialism developed in the Colored Farmers’ Alliance was snuffed out by white farmers’ theological racism (53). Meanwhile, with a Protestant missionary spirit, white middle-class progressives preached a social gospel focused on urban industrialization and government-sponsored social reform, organizing especially on the issue of temperance, as black progressives pursued the same goals while trying also to assimilate into the mainstream church tradition (53, 59). Ultimately, however, the progressives were
no match for more conservative Christianity or their own inability to frontally address social ills in the region, especially racism. But both examples make Harvey’s point about diversity in Southern evangelicalism: in the form of both Populism’s “camp-meeting fervor” and Progressivism’s missionary impulse, evangelicals challenged the conservative social order.

Harvey is careful to show that women were deeply involved in some aspects of these struggles, most famously temperance, but also interracial exchange, women’s suffrage, and labor issues. While maintaining their expected social roles, evangelical women ran enormous missions and reform organizations and funneled enormous funds in support of causes they supported. Middle-class women, both black and white, took up the Progressive cause with passion and, especially in light of their own limited social status, some success.

As Harvey’s portrait of early twentieth-century evangelical diversity takes shape, it become clear that class is also highly significant to the discussion: whether Populist yeomen were defending their farms, middle-class Progressives were fighting child labor, or the Southern radicals who came after them were working for farmers’ rights, they were all addressing issues of class. So, while it is not Harvey’s stated focus, he raises issues of class and religion that beg deeper investigation. A key example is the Progressives’ efforts to limit Southern cotton mills’ employment of children under age fourteen. Harvey cites the career of Alexander McKelway, a white, educated North Carolina pastor who led the charge that eventually resulted in the 1915 law prohibiting labor for these children. But this white paternalism among elite Progressive evangelicals was ultimately empty of real reform: the new law was rarely enforced and black child labor was never even placed on the table as an issue. Indeed, leaders like McKelway worked out of their concern that the white race not be “degenerated” by child labor (58).

But, even as lynching and other expressions of violent racial hatred spread through the region, leaders in the increasingly conservative larger black denominations could similarly turn a blind eye to class issues. Harvey details the allegiance given by black Methodist preachers in Birmingham, Alabama, to the local coal mining companies. Serving as ministers in company-sponsored churches, they preached an anti-union message, only to alienate the city’s black working class (61).

It was the religious radicals of the following generation, as Harvey shows, who not only truly pioneered interracial dialogue and cooperation, but also recognized that the poor and working classes cut across the racial divide and needed both solidarity with each other and a gospel that addressed their current needs in addition to eternal life. Again, some prophetic leaders did emerge from within the mainstream denominations. Among the key labor and racial integration radicals Harvey discusses is Baptist scholar Clarence Jordan, who in 1942 co-founded the communal farming experiment in southwest Georgia called Koinonia Farm.
Jordan understood that in the South white and black poor farmers faced the same struggles and were hit especially hard during the 1930s Depression, and at Koinonia, black and white farmers pooled their resources and lived side by side. After hearing Jordan speak about the farm, the young Baptist Helen Lewis turned away from denominational evangelical piety and accepted the call to apply her faith to fighting injustice; she went on to defend sharecroppers and organize for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) (80–81). Still other Baptists organized against hazardous steel mill conditions, continued the fight to reform child labor, and promoted labor organizing, and remarkably, in 1938 the Southern Baptist Convention recognized the “right of labor to organize and engage in collective bargaining” (81–82). Mainline Protestant denominations followed suit.

Though short-lived, this openness to the concerns of labor on the part of the mainstream churches is a testament to the effect of prophetic voices and activism in Southern evangelicalism. When Southern labor leaders launched a general strike among textile workers in 1934 and later the Operation Dixie campaign in the late 1940s and early 50s, they fostered religion-labor relations to support the workers, issuing pamphlets like The Church and the Labor Unions. Beset by charges of being anti-Christian and anti-southern and of promoting racial mixing, and facing massive employer resistance and less than favorable labor laws, both efforts largely failed (83–84). But, as Harvey demonstrates with detailed accounts, these labor struggles benefitted enormously from many years of work from Christian activists like Lucy Randolph Mason—“Miss Lucy of the CIO”—and Miles Horton, who established Highlander Folk School in Tennessee to train labor activists and later offer “citizenship schools” that by the 1950s were seminal in the development of young civil rights leaders like Dorothy Cotton and Andrew Young. While Mason was from a prominent Episcopal family from Richmond and Horton was raised in the hills of Tennessee, they and other radical Christians of this generation, while largely white and middle-class, did break from the conservative mainstream denomination theology and practice.

A similar figure was Howard “Buck” Kester, himself from rural West Virginia but educated at Vanderbilt, who worked with black members of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) in the Arkansas Delta; Kester witnessed firsthand both the violence directed at them and the ways they brought together religion and activism,2

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2In his discussion of Kester, Harvey gives particular attention to the fact that Kester’s mentor, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, noted the ways farmers in the Mississippi Delta moved beyond the confines of the conservative evangelical denominations. While visiting a cooperative farm for sharecroppers in Mississippi, Niebuhr wrote that here the church was “as middle class . . . as anywhere else,” catering to “the planters and merchants,” while the sharecroppers were served by lay preachers without formal training. In describing these preachers as leaders in organizing both farmers and millhands in the South, Niebuhr said: “Their theological notions are crude but their close relations to their people drives them into socially significant actions which the more
and later founded the interracial group Fellowship of Southern Churchmen (FSC). The FSC’s mission, in Kester’s words, was to confront “wide-spread poverty, class-conflict, racial bitterness, general unemployment” and “spiritual disintegration” (100) in the segregated South, and the organization developed numerous interracial projects for youth and provided support for pastors and other Christian workers fighting segregation.

While Harvey’s evidence for evangelical diversity on interracialism and class issues largely focuses on figures like Jordan and Kester—whites from diverse backgrounds who, through education, developed alternate biblical readings and thus developed an oppositional stance—his work on religious expressive culture more clearly demonstrates evangelical diversity among working class whites and blacks and establishes another wellspring for prophetic activism in the mid-twentieth century. He details how unschooled lay and itinerant preachers, along with singers and faith healers, drew biracial audiences starting in the late 1800s, often drawing people from the two races to the altar together. He says that blacks and whites held in common many “social evangelical customs,” including “impassioned sermons, folk songs and gospel hymns, revival services, baptisms, foodways, and folkways” (111), all forms in the “more private spaces of religious experience” (110) that affected public life and sometimes resulted in racially mixed religious gatherings and social and political interracialism. He discusses the high level of emotionalism in services, a vestige of nineteenth-century revivalism that lasted into the twentieth century in rural areas; among both blacks and whites, the worship style of urban believers grew more decorous, while the style in rural areas remained highly physical, verbal, and emotionally free in expression, with a heavy emphasis on visions, dreams, and personal encounters with the supernatural.

As Harvey demonstrates, as Baptist and Methodist churches became more middle class, the development of both black and white Holiness and Pentecostal churches continued to fuel popular religious expression, especially in music, as they drew on earlier forms among both blacks and whites like spirituals, the blues, early gospel, and shape note singing. And the flow of songs, lyrics, and melodies back and forth between blacks and whites deeply informed the making of twentieth-century popular music in the South, including in figures as various as Mahalia Jackson, Hank Williams, Bill Monroe, Ray Charles, and Elvis Presley. Very significantly, as Pentecostals at the outset attracted common folk estranged from the mainstream evangelical churches, both black and white, interracial worship was also common. After all, as Harvey explores in detail, Southern Pentecostalism had its roots in the 1906 Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, where black and white preachers, all from the South, converged to intelligent church leaders might well envy” (99).
worship together and then later “carried the message to white and black southern communities from Texas to Virginia” (131).

Harvey also examines evangelical diversity and interracialism in *Freedom’s Coming* in an insightful reading of the diversity of black Southern evangelicals in the civil rights movement—the struggles activists faced as they dealt with “the reality that ‘the black church’ was not, as a rule, behind the movement” (176)—and a provocative argument that the Southern religious right of the late twentieth century turned the energy it had put into segregation into a defense of a “theology that sanctifies gendered hierarchy” (246).

**“Classified” Southern Religion**

It is Harvey’s work on the late 1800s to 1950s, however, that provides a rich backdrop to the work of other historians of religion in the South like Richard J. Callahan Jr., whose *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields* explores the connections between religion and class in the 1931 confrontations between mine owners and union miners, and Jarod Roll and Erik S. Sellman, whose recent efforts examine the role that religious belief and practice played in the farmers’ rights movement in the Missouri Bootheel in the early 1930s. As already stated, Harvey himself does not explore class itself as a category of analysis, but his work on interracial cooperation and cultural exchange, which often took place among poor farmers and industry laborers, informs the consideration of class conflict as key factors in the study of religion in the South. In turn, for a growing number of historians, grappling with issues of labor, class status, and poverty in the South of the late nineteenth through mid-twentieth century means looking at how these affected both black and whites, with the interesting finding that in many instances they crossed racial boundaries to find common ground and cause. In the larger story of the South as a region, the crisis caused by the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy is not unique, of course—it occurred throughout the country—but the material and cultural effects were deep and widespread in this region, which had developed a cotton economy using slave labor and only fully converted to small-scale farming on tenant and farmer-owned land in the post-Civil War period, among both blacks and whites, with little industrialization until the early 1900s.

The 2011 volume of *The Journal of Southern Religion* featured a roundtable discussion on how a focus on class might affect the study of religion in the early twentieth-century South\(^3\) in which labor historian Ken Fones-Wolf expressed his

\(^3\) Similar conversations are occurring for American history overall, and historians of religion are attempting to reinsert class as a category for analysis. A good example of recent work focusing on the relationship between class and religion in American religion is Sean McCloud’s *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies*. 

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amazement at turning back to the 1984 edition of *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South* and finding “no entries for class, social class, workers, millhands, labor, the poor, capitalism, industrialization or anything else” related to class and then looking at the 2005 edition of the encyclopedia and finding it only marginally better in its treatment of the issue. But while race has been a central preoccupation of studies of Southern religion since the 1960s—and rightly so—more historians are now looking also at the role of class, and many see this as a corrective to earlier scholarship.

Though Callahan does not focus on the confluence of class and interracialism (he says the work on the role of black miners in eastern Kentucky is yet to be done), his approach to class and religion clearly establishes some of the central concerns for this type of study. In the roundtable discussion, he emphasizes class as “a process” and religion as an element in the formation of class, not something separate from it, and in turn, religion as “a powerful resource for identity and survival” after it has become “classified.” Of the coal fields of eastern Kentucky, he says, “[R]eligious traditions took on new significance in the class context by providing identity, legitimation of values, and alternative sources of authority from those who dominated the industrial economy.”

Callahan begins *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields*\(^4\) with his stated goal of departing from earlier scholarship on industrialization that focused on institutional religion and examined “extraordinary religious practices” only as “compensation for poverty or social disempowerment” (3). In contrast, he asserts that in eastern Kentucky in the 1930s miners articulated “an orientation to the world that merges religious idiom and material reality through the experience of daily work,” with the result that the labor movement in eastern Kentucky was “a form of religion expression that . . . emerged from the struggle to express and meet particular human concerns in the context of industrial capitalism” (2-3). He also clearly presents this project as a challenge to religious history that focuses on institutions and traditions, as he uses concepts from anthropology and comparative religion in an effort to understand how these miners made “religious sense” of their world in their daily lives (4).

In this exploration of lived religion, Callahan relies especially on oral histories, folk tales, and local musical traditions to describe how the white miners of Bell and Harlan Counties, most coming from a Scots-Irish Presbyterian heritage, were increasingly drawn to the music-filled, physical, and highly emotional Holiness and Pentecostal movements, which transformed the worship traditions developed

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\(^4\) Callahan himself discusses at length the cultural distinctiveness of Appalachian mountain religion and Appalachian Kentucky in particular (6–8, 17–38). While this area of the U.S. South has its own unique characteristics, it also shares many commonalities with the rest of the region.
in the earlier pre-industrial agrarian economy, “intensifying and energizing them in the industrial setting” (129). As he looks at the miners’ daily lives, Callahan also charts their religious view of their work, epitomized in figures like miner-preacher Talmadge Allen, who said “hard times’ll come, but the good’ll always overcome the bad. It’s gonna take a lot of beatin’s, though, and a lot of hardness for you to come out on top. I’ve never seen it fail in my life” (123). Mining was hard work, and so was the suffering it entailed in continual threat of injury or death. The body, and the especially the body in work, was a central source of religious knowledge for the miners and their families. Callahan says, “What is remarkable is not the ‘escapism’ of Holiness believers, but rather their engagement with material and social conditions—giving religious significance to their everyday challenges, creating a map and orientation to the moral complexities of their surroundings” (156).

This resulted, he argues, in their struggle against unjust treatment by corrupt mine owners and their experiments with unionism. Using Raymond Williams’ dictum that meaning “is always produced” and “is never simply expressed” (145), Callahan demonstrates that religious activity was itself a kind of work that in turn led them to the union, which “became the locus of new formations and expressions of the dual crisis—material and spiritual—that made up” life in the coal fields (189). Though the miners’ synthesis of religion and labor resistance with the National Miners Unions in 1931 and 1932 was short-lived (after members realized the union’s national leaders were atheists), this period paved the way for subsequent successful efforts by the United Mine Workers of America. Callahan says that miners’ concerns still “intertwine at a basic level with religious expression, sentiment, and imagination” in the central Appalachian coal mines (2). Throughout this work, Callahan combines concepts and methods from religious studies, cultural theory, history, and anthropology in insightful ways to explore the interwoven meaning and material conditions of religion and work in his subjects’ lives.

**Interracialism and Class Struggle**

While Jarod Roll does not develop a full-scale religious studies or cultural theory apparatus as Callahan does, the spread of early twentieth-century Pentecostalism and the promise of interracialism deeply inform his *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South*, in which he explores how black and white farm workers in the Missouri Bootheel—a great many of them recent migrants from the Ozarks, the Cumberland Plateau of western Tennessee and Kentucky, and the delta areas of Mississippi and Arkansas—combined evangelical religion with

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5 This widespread migration began when landowners conducted a large-scale conversion of the forests and swamps in the Bootheel to farmland. Farmers already suffering by the introduction of cash economies in the South went to the area looking for the freedom to produce and
working class protest to fight for economic stability and decent food, housing, and health care for their struggling families as the agricultural system moved from subsistence to corporate farms in a cash economy. Roll’s argument is that even as the Socialist Party, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sometimes united blacks and whites but more often separated them in their political work, deeper interracial cooperation became possible as their shared religious convictions and practices pulled them together in recognition of their common class struggle. The evangelical fervor they brought to interracial organizing in the Southern Tenants Farmers Union eventually culminated in an event that captured the national imagination and forced the federal government to take notice: over 1000 men, women, and children, black and white, camped out along US highways 60 and 61, braving winter temperatures, living in tents surrounded by their scant belongings, and joining at firesides to be exhorted by lay preachers and to sing hymns about carrying on the struggle.

In the 2011 roundtable discussion on class in the *Journal of Southern Religion*, Roll says that his years of charting labor organizing in the Missouri Bootheel brought him fully to the realization that “an attention to class in the history of southern religion bids us to think more thoroughly and creatively about the wider role of faith as lived by believers, whether rich or poor, in all aspects of their existence.” And indeed, he was able to chart the effects of religious belief and practice in the working class precisely through the records of grassroots socialist organizations in the Bootheel in the 1910s and 20s, where the ties between farmers’ revivalist fervor and their Socialist activism became clear, which then sent him back to Pentecostal newspapers to look for additional links—but this time knowing exactly what he was looking for. This carried over to his examination of STFU records, where he found new layers of cross-fertilization—union meetings in Pentecostal, Holiness, and Primitive Baptist churches, for example. He realized then that the farmers who joined the STFU “as a way to reject earthly exercises of economic and political power also seemed to belong to rebellious churches that rejected the authority and control of church elites in the big, established denominations. What is more, many of these people challenged Jim Crow racial divisions as part of their labor and/or religious rebellion.”

Though at times in *Spirit of Rebellion* Roll does not develop the connections between religious belief and political organizing as fully as he could, he certainly establishes that telling the story of religion in the South merely through the institutional records of the larger denominations is only partial at best and that it certainly elides class as a major category of analysis. Through rereading labor protest as religious
history, scholars are able to find more diversity in rural Southern evangelicalism than previously imagined. As Roll says in the *Journal of Southern Religion* roundtable, in the course of his research, the older narrative—“that socialists were uninterested in religion and that southern Christians, especially Pentecostals, were resolutely apolitical, if not outright antagonistic to worldly affairs”—was turned on its head. He says he came to understand that the narrative of class struggle and that of religion are “parts of a larger whole separated, in many instances, by only the fuzziest of lines.”

In the Missouri Bootheel, this synthesis of religious and political fervor emerged as Pentecostal revivalism attracted rural people throughout the countryside in the early 1900s. But Roll shows that in the beginning, through the 1920s, this mix of class and religion did not also foster interracialism. Though socialism drew on a producerist agrarian ideal rooted in Christian cosmology and the language of citizenship—the father as the head of a self-sufficient farming family, charged by God to fulfill this task on their own land—it spread quickly among farm workers who feared wage “slavery” and tenancy as they felt threatened by African American migrants moving into the area. In contrast, though black farmers shared this producerist ideal and aspired to own their own farms, they channeled most of their organizing energy into Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association and tried to survive threats of racist violence. Both whites and blacks made connections between religion and politics, but their organizing efforts stalled and they remained segregated.

But Roll shows that along with the economic struggles of the Depression came a new sense of spiritual hunger, and as the major denominations in the Bootheel retreated into themselves to try and shore up their existing congregations, the rural population entered into a new period of revival in Pentecostal, Holiness, and small-sect Baptist groups that created new congregations better matched to believers’ growing need to feel that God cared about their predicament. As farm families experienced one crisis after another—drought, starvation wages, Red Cross relief operations that could not meet everyone’s needs, followed by a growing shift from tenancy to day labor, growth in disease, and child mortality—blacks increasingly turned to the NAACP and especially the STFU, the latter of which held organizing meetings like they were revivals, with prayers and adaptations of hymns to support the cause. As one white sharecropper said, “When they first started talking about the union I thought it was a new church” (97). And though their cooperation remained minimal at this time, the STFU first brought blacks and whites together in union meetings.

Instrumental in this interracial effort were two preachers, one white and one black, who formed a fast friendship during the STFU drive in the Bootheel and whose lifelong work throughout the South followed parallel tracks as they promoted
a gospel of class solidarity and interracial cooperation to build the Kingdom of God on earth. Jarod Roll did extensive research on one of the men, Owen Whitfield, for *Spirit of Rebellion*, while Erik S. Gellman researched Claude Williams for his ground-breaking volume *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights*, and together they weave the two men’s stories into a tale of concerted interracial activism grounded in what Williams called a “rebellious faith” (72). In *The Gospel of the Working Class*, Roll and Gellman explore how Williams’s preaching on behalf of the STFU laid the interracial groundwork for what was to come, and it ignited Whitfield to action.

Williams first preached in Charleston, Missouri, in summer 1936 and was so popular that he returned to preach in the Baptist church pastored by Whitfield that November. As Gellman and Roll relate, Williams declared the unity of the races in class-based protest. “We have to build the Kingdom of God on earth,” Williams is reported to have said, going on to stress that by “world” Jesus meant “the social order” (Gellman and Roll 70). Combining a this-worldly focus on justice with an emphasis on racial unity—“I turned to the Bible,” Williams said, “and found there is not race, creed, or color in Jesus’ religion”—Williams fired the crowd into a call and response that urged him to “[p]reach union!” (70, 72) Deeply affected by what Williams called “a new Pentecost” (72; see also Roll 100), Whitfield became the driving force behind the 1939 mass roadside mobilization and a leader in interracial labor organizing throughout the South and Midwest. Addressing the Third National Negro Congress in Washington, D.C., in April 1940, Whitfield articulated his own full realization of the authentic gospel: religious leaders, he said, preach “too much INSPIRATION and too little INFORMATION," with a desire to “preach Jesus Christ” without including “the policies of Christ” (Gellman and Roll 110). Enacting the Kingdom of God on earth, he declared, meant interracial cooperation and “concerted but peaceful actions for higher economics and a higher standard of living” (111). And with a telling call that astounded educated middle class black union and religious leaders, he concluded by stressing his own working class work and vision: “With your learning and my experience, we can tear down the whole slave system in the South and bring about to all civil rights” (111).

As Gellman and Roll explore, Whitfield was a sharecropper completely immersed in the working class agrarian struggle, but also a Pentecostal preacher originally from Mississippi, while Williams was a trained Presbyterian minister from west Tennessee who eventually combined his poor upbringing in a yeoman farm family with a radical universal gospel vision he honed as a young preacher in Paris, Arkansas. There, even Williams’s efforts to offer recreational card and baseball games to working class people on Sundays caused scandal, but it was his comparison of “the problems of labor with the teachings of Jesus” and his outreach to local miners and black cotton farmers that most enraged local religious elites.
Meanwhile, Whitfield moved from a philosophy of self-determination to a focus on racial—and interracial solidarity—as he absorbed Williams’s message into his own narrative of receiving an epiphany from God that his response to his own family’s hunger and suffering should be to preach a gospel message that “sends you home mad” (74).

Both men clearly rooted their working class, interracial efforts in a radical gospel they developed at the edges of mainstream denominationalism in the South, Whitfield as a Pentecostal and Williams always on the fringes of Presbyterian institutions and constantly threatened with expulsion. Gellman and Roll’s in-depth treatment of the personal evolution of these two men thoroughly illustrates the ways evangelical religion and working class solidarity combined in the Deep South through the 1930s and 40s. Though it was a vision that met hard times as union organizing faltered in the 1950s and 60s, their work deeply influenced civil rights activists of the next generation—and it had an immediate impact as they worked for an agrarian society in which “rural producers could reap the benefits of their work and lead healthy lives” (Roll 105).

As Roll shows in *Spirit of Rebellion*, it was the STFU that kept the pressure on the Roosevelt administration through the 1930s, demanding and winning relief for thousands of homeless families after the government intentionally flooded much of the area to take pressure off of Illinois’s levees. But their calls for a “family wage” for agricultural workers were met with only increasing government incentive for large landowners to use wage laborers instead of tenants, which eventually led to large-scale evictions in 1938. This scale of crisis led to the first widespread integration of the STFU, as white tenants flocked to existing black locals and formed new integrated ones, in large part under the leadership of Whitfield. The pinnacle of achievement for the STFU during this period was, as Rolls demonstrates, the Farm Security Administration’s response to demands for land ownership with the creation of La Forge Farms for 100 sharecropping households in New Madrid County. Remarkably, the community included both blacks and whites, and Whitfield celebrated La Forge as a model for the region, joining a white organizer to speak at meetings where tenants crowded into churches to hear the message. “Finally,” Roll said, “it seemed that a generation of white and black rural working people was coming together” (125).

But crisis came around again, this time in the form of the announcement of large-scale evictions of several thousand sharecroppers to come in January 1939, and Whitfield and the large cadre of STFU locals realized they needed a strong show of force. Planning the roadside demonstration in secret, they recruited families to join, and Whitfield preached to a group of several hundred union activists just before the evictions were to begin. Invoking the example of Moses leading the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, he called the people to “testify” with their lives on Highways 60
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and 61 (131). Relying on community and national support, the demonstrators kept up their protest for months and fueled another swell in union organizing through the area. Though the STFU and the farming cooperatives would not last long after, the farmers for a time joined their lived experience of religion and work in interracial cooperation and protest.

Lessons for Future Work

All these new works of history clearly support the developing narrative in religious history of the South in the late 1800s through the mid-1900s, demonstrating the diversity of evangelicalism that resulted in a rich expressive culture among both blacks and whites and episodes of interracialism and class solidarity and struggle (often together). The works by Callahan, Roll, and Gellman all underscore Harvey’s case that evangelicalism in the South has always been more diverse than previously thought, and each especially demonstrates the power of Pentecostalism as a religious, social, and political force, creating (or responding to) a breakdown in the mainstream traditions’ relevance to the material conditions of believers’ daily lives. In Harvey’s work, scholars also see the diversity within the black church itself, while in the work of Roll and Gellman, one also sees the convergence of interracialism not just with newer forms of evangelical belief and worship, but also in relation to class status and protest.

But the lessons for scholars continuing to look at religion in the South are numerous. Clearly, the focus on lived religion is now fully developed among historians of religion in the region, but more would still do well to look beyond denominational records and news outlets and innovate in their research to explore all areas of believers’ lives for evidence of how religion affected what they believed and did.

Very importantly also, historians of religion would benefit from a fuller and clearer articulation of class as a category for research and analysis. They still have much to learn from labor historians in this regard. But at the same time those like Roll with a background primarily in labor history could use more understanding and exploration of the nexus of biblical and theological traditions, ritual, and religious cultural practices within which believers made sense of their daily lives. And both religious and labor historians could use more grounding in religious studies’ analysis of the dynamic interplay between orthodoxy and orthopraxy; the role of ritual, myth, language, and the body in daily experience of religion; and the perceived boundaries between the sacred and profane. Of the scholars discussed here, Callahan is the clear exception to this latter point, as he takes seriously and applies the ideas of scholars of religion as diverse as Emile Durkheim, Clifford Geertz, and Talal Asad, but more scholars could follow his lead to develop richer stories of Southern religion by deepening the anthropological and cultural studies dimensions of their work.
In addition, while plenty of work clearly remains to be done on interracialism, an area that still especially needs more full-scale attention is gender, including the ways that religious beliefs and attitudes evolved to accommodate the changing status of women, both black and white, during the South’s tumultuous race and class struggles. The four scholars discussed here are all careful to include women and their contributions in their histories, but their efforts do not foreground the question of gender itself. Harvey continually interweaves the stories of individual women into his narrative, and he devotes ample space to the work of progressive women in denominational auxiliaries, but he does not explore the ways that their work grew out of or challenged gendered understandings of women’s faith and practice, nor does he integrate the question of freedom for women into his larger narrative, save to argue that the fundamentalist rearguard fueled their energies into defending gender hierarchy after they lost the battle for segregation. And while Callahan details the role of eastern Kentucky miners’ wives in organizing for the National Miners’ Union, their role is ultimately subsumed to that of their husbands, and he does not apply the same level of anthropological and religious studies analysis to their labor as wives, mothers, and domestic workers as he does to that of the miners themselves. Roll and Gellman, meanwhile, point out multiple ways that the vision and dedication of Claude Williams’s wife Joyce and Owen Whitfield’s wife Zella were important to their husbands’ prophetic work, but the central story is clearly not their own. These historians do draw on the existing scholarship on women in Southern religion to some extent, but most of the larger social history of gender and religion in the South during this time period still remains to be done.

This sample of recent significant works, nevertheless, clearly demonstrates the exciting ways that historians are adjusting focus and method to develop a more complex and nuanced narrative of Southern religion. Their contributions certainly give cause for celebration to all Southerners and observers of life in the South who want to mull over, wrestle with, and try to understand the particularities and peculiarities of religious life in this distinctive region.
Works Cited


