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## From Lost Cause to Third-and-Long: College Football and the Civil Religion of the South

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Southerners and non-southerners alike have often remarked that the South was born when Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse in 1865. Defeat and surrender gave birth to the idea of the South. Defeat and surrender helped create the "Lost Cause"—that amalgamation of ideas and beliefs, history and legend that defined what the South meant for the years immediately after the war, through the 20th century, and even today. The "cause," of course, was the defense of the Confederacy. Southerners (unless otherwise noted, this generally means *white* southerners) understood that the war was lost, though still they honored and memorialized the valor of those who fought. They blamed the Yankee victory on the vicious and arbitrary machinations of fate or even laid it in God's hands. But more than simply a military defeat, the Lost Cause refers to an idealistic image of the South and the southern way of life, a hearkening to a golden age before the "War of Northern Aggression" changed everything, and an unshakable conviction that there is something grander about the South and about being a southerner.

The claim about Lee's surrender reminds us that any place—whether the size of a nation, a state, or even a town—is little more than an expanse of land until those living there have an idea of who they are and what that location means to them. This certainly was true of the South. While there obviously was a geographic south in the United States from its very formation, it did not attain much of a regional identity until the mid-19th century. As W.J. Cash, in his influential *The Mind of the South*, writes:

[I]t was the conflict with the Yankee which really created the concept of the South as something more than a matter of geography, as an object of patriotism, in the minds of the Southerners. Before that fateful engagement opened, they had been patriots, but only to their local communes and to their various states. So little had they been aware of any common bond of affection and pride, indeed, that often the hallmark of their patriotism had been an implacable antagonism toward the states which immediately adjoined their own, a notable example being the ancient feud of North Carolina with Virginia on the one side, and with South Carolina on the other. Nor was this feeling ever to die out. Merely, it would be rapidly balanced by rising loyalty to the new-conceived and greater entity—a loyalty that obviously had superior sanction in interest, and all the fierce vitality bred by resistance to open attack.<sup>(1)</sup>

Of course, these interstate rivalries in the South still exist today, though they more commonly are manifested in the heated gridiron battles between (for example) the Tennessee Volunteers and the Alabama Crimson Tide or between the Georgia Bulldogs and the Florida Gators. Identification with and the pride in the South still exist today as well, again played out in intersectional meetings between innumerable southern teams and, really, any team not from the South.

In the South, football teams at the state universities have come to represent the people of the state and, more broadly, one's interest in and devotion to the team has come to be part of what it means to be a southerner. College football became part of the southern way of life. "Save some Southerners' unshakable belief that the Civil War was in fact the War of Northern Aggression," football analyst Tony Barnhart writes, "nothing is more ingrained in the Southern psyche than the love of Southern college football—not as a game or a mere diversion, but as a way of life."<sup>(2)</sup>

Tradition is very important in the South. It is what perpetuated and perpetuates the Lost Cause. It is central to college football. College football in the South includes many traditions across a great number of college campuses. Time-honored customs include tailgating, the marching band, the team walk to the stadium before the game, and much more. "These traditions are the glue that binds the generations of Southern college football fans to one another and keeps them coming back to their beloved campuses year after year," Barnhart notes. "People in the South take these football traditions very, very seriously. To many fans, the renewal of these traditions each fall provides all the physical and emotional comfort of a warm blanket on a cold winter's night."<sup>(3)</sup> In short, college football has become a tradition in the South alongside and integrated with the other traditions that constitute the Lost Cause and the self-identity of southerners. Take, for example, former Tennessee Governor Winfield Dunn's preface to a book about the history of the University of Tennessee football team. Dunn recounts the legend of the nickname, "The Volunteer State." He recalls the military successes in which Tennesseans took part. This "historical fact," he writes, "perhaps had as much as anything to do with the development of the attitude and tradition of the great people of Tennessee. That attitude and tradition are characteristic of Tennessee football."<sup>(4)</sup> Thus, he adds that a book about Tennessee football is not just a book about a game. It is "a reminder of tradition, of life, of competition, of struggle, of history. It is Tennessee."<sup>(5)</sup> Similar statements could be made about Alabama football, Georgia football, and the sport at many other state schools.

This essay outlines how college football came to be such an integral element of southern culture, culminating with three illustrative examples (with accompanying videos) of how southern identity and college football are mixed in important game day rituals. In the end what we see is a glimpse of southern civil religion in all its pomp and glory.

### ***Southern Civil Religion: The Church and the Stadium***

While the idea of civil religion certainly existed before the 1960s, sociologist Robert Bellah popularized the term in that decade. In a ground-breaking essay, "Civil Religion in America," Bellah observed that "the civil religion at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people."<sup>(6)</sup> For Bellah the history and nature of the American people and their country became the means by which the "universal and transcendent religious reality" was known or understood. It was not a substitution of the secular or civil for the religious, but a melding of the two. Consequently, one could talk of the doctrine of America (e.g., freedom, democracy) in religious terms; refer to American national holidays as fitting into a liturgical calendar; make note of important rituals that celebrate the nation and what it stands for, such as the singing of the national anthem (before sporting events no less); recognize certain prominent individuals as national heroes or saints; and talk about central symbols both in terms of what they mean and how they are treated as sacred objects (e.g., the flag).

While Bellah focused on civil religion as the intersection of the civil and the religious, others have argued that the civil (the state or nation) is not only an expression of the ultimate reality but is the ultimate reality itself. Will Herberg, for example, argued that it is not "God" that is the object of devotion for American civil religion, but the "American Way of Life,"<sup>(7)</sup> which brings unity to the nation and is the referent of Americans' rituals, symbols, and sacred narratives.

Although the South is not a separate nation, it once was. The socio-historical roots of southern civil religion may go back further than the Civil War, but it was that conflict that marked the true genesis of southern civil religion. As historian Kurt O. Berends has observed, many southerners believed the Civil War was a "holy war."<sup>(8)</sup> As in any holy war, sacrifices are demanded and made. The greatest sacrifice, of course, was one's life. These sacrifices made on behalf of the Confederacy were salvific.<sup>(9)</sup> Those who died were saved eternally as a consequence. In this sense Christianity fused with regional identity—what it meant to be a Christian was the same as what it meant to be a southerner. Berends concluded, "During the war, southern identity, with its emphasis on honor, became fused with Christian identity. For many southerners, saving the Confederacy became tantamount to saving Christianity."<sup>(10)</sup> The merging of the institutional religion with a conception (however exaggerated) of a nation and its identity can be the precondition for a civil religion—certainly along the lines envisioned by Bellah. This seems to have been the case in the South. As Charles Reagan Wilson has succinctly put it, "Without the Lost Cause, no civil religion would have existed."<sup>(11)</sup> Historian Andrew M. Manis, like Bellah, located southern civil religion at the intersection of the civil and the religious. He argued that "[c]ivil religion is 'housed' exclusively in neither the religious nor the political systems. Rather, both appeal to it to help give meaning and integration to the society."<sup>(12)</sup>

Despite the loss of the war and the trauma of Reconstruction, state-sanctioned segregation, and the Civil Rights era, southerners have long talked about (even bragged about) the southern "way of life." It is an object of fond admiration if not devotion—perhaps in the way described by Herberg. Sociologist John Shelton Reed

acknowledges the deep "devotion" that southerners have not only to their region, but even more to their local communities. He writes: "there is still in the South a level of devotion and commitment to local communities unparalleled elsewhere. In the past, this has often been expressed as mindless boosterism: in my Tennessee hometown, we used to brag about how high on the list of nuclear targets we were."<sup>(13)</sup> He notes that southerners think their region is better than others, and they tend to like one another because of their southernness.<sup>(14)</sup> Samuel S. Hill, a leading scholar of religion in the South, also seems to lean toward Herberg's understanding of civil religion. Hill emphasizes the identity of culture with ultimate reality. "Southernness," in Hill's estimation, "has been the ultimate social good news. In a descriptive sense, society is God."<sup>(15)</sup>

Whether we adopt the theory of civil religion of Bellah or Herberg, it is clear, as Wilson notes, that southern culture always has blurred the distinction between the secular and the sacred.<sup>(16)</sup> Wilson argues that civil religion in the South "has been embodied in the official religion of the churches, but it has also been diffused through southern culture, appearing at such rituals as football games, beauty pageants, and rock and country music concerts."<sup>(17)</sup> Of course, the key point here is the way that college football plays a role in southern civil religion. Others have noted this. Michael Novak, whose book *The Joy of Sports* (1967) was an early treatment of the relationship between sports and religion, claims that in "Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi [we easily could add Georgia, Tennessee, and others] . . . college football is a statewide religion; it *does* celebrate the state and the region."<sup>(18)</sup> In other words, in college football important southern civil religion rituals are performed. "Somehow, in the South," he adds, "to play a good game is to honor one's state, one's university, the South, and the true spirit of the American nation."<sup>(19)</sup> The football team of the state university becomes a tangible expression of the strength and character of the university and thus the people of the state (and, perhaps, the region and the country).

College football has been central to the set of rituals in southern civil religion. While more recently challenged by stock car racing and basketball, it remains the king. Anybody moving to the South should know this. As Reed observes, "Newcomers might want to pick a team and follow it. It doesn't greatly matter which one—it's like religion that way, too."<sup>(20)</sup>

### ***College Football in Southern History***

College football began in the northeast (the land of Yankees), dating back perhaps to an 1869 match between Princeton and Rutgers that vaguely resembled what we call the game of football. By the end of the 19th century college football was a great success in the northeast, dominated by what came to be known as the "Ivy League," including, among others, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. By the end of the 19th century in the South, however, college football was just beginning to catch on. While southerners came to the game late, they did so for many of the same reasons.

Michael Oriard has detailed the cultural significance of football (especially college football) better perhaps than anyone. He argues that it attained a special status as a consequence of its differences from any professional or high school teams. Professional teams received national attention, and generally were made up of men from many different parts of the country. High school teams were composed of local boys, but brought little attention to a town or city beyond the county or perhaps the region. "[W]hat college football offered fans that professional and high school football could not," Oriard notes, "was a local team competing in a national arena."<sup>(21)</sup> This was critical to the development of college football in the South. Teams came to represent not only their states, but the region itself. This became more significant as college football came to prominence in the national media. College football and other sports increasingly made up a large portion of newsreel footage, and sports-related films captivated the public.<sup>(22)</sup>

"As football teams became public symbols of universities, communities, and entire regions in a hugely publicized national drama," Oriard contends, "intersectional games and postseason bowl games proliferated in the 1920s and 1930s."<sup>(23)</sup> Nowhere were these intersectional games more important than in the South. The longstanding desire of southerners to prove their worth vis-à-vis the North—especially in the wake of their defeat in the Civil War and the white humiliation of Reconstruction—naturally carried over into gridiron contests. This does not mean necessarily that southerners played any harder than players from Ohio or Massachusetts. Although we can never know the comparable intensity of players from different regions or the comparable fervor of fans from different regions, the history of the South and its particular condition (poor and illiterate beyond the national average, and thus impassioned by a desire to prove themselves to their northern neighbors) suggest that fans and players in other sections very likely experienced football differently.

Oriard comments that the "1920s and 1930s marked the age of intersectional football, when distinct football

regions emerged, and competitions between their representatives each season mapped a shifting geographical balance of power."<sup>(24)</sup> This change in regional fortunes was from the Northeast to the Midwest and the South. While we are not concerned here with the reasons for the midwestern shift, we already have touched on historical and cultural elements in the South that might explain a rise to prominence in the world of college football.

Football writer Keith Dunnivant observes that in "the South of the early twentieth century, the Civil War was still more of a closely held grudge than a page ripped from the history books."<sup>(25)</sup> The game of football, then, imported from the North, was played—especially in intersectional contests—with that grudge lurking somewhere in the minds of players and spectators. Oriard argues that for a "broad cross-section of the entire South in the 1920s . . . triumphs of southern football teams validated the region against the scorn of outsiders."<sup>(26)</sup> In his account of Alabama football in the 1950s, Tom Stoddard writes that the "game was a powerful source of pride and self-esteem for individuals, families, towns, cities, and the entire state. The mythic connections to the Lost Cause of the Confederacy were part of the reason."<sup>(27)</sup> The degree of pride that southerners took and still take in regard to their college football team also is a function of how they saw themselves and see themselves through northern (meaning now anywhere outside the South) eyes. Stoddard observes: "All they [southerners] knew about the North was that people there looked down upon them and thought of them as bigoted, pellagra-ridden, and lazy. What better way to prove otherwise than to kick ass in a hard, physical game."<sup>(28)</sup>

In addition to the almost visceral reaction that southern fans may have had or continue to have about their football programs (especially in regard to their games with non-southern teams), it is important to remember that southern college football teams are connected to actual universities. The universities themselves are sources of identification and pride for many southerners. As southern universities and education in general began to take on a more prominent role in the South in the 20th century, the football team became a symbol of those efforts. In a strange reversal, however, the success of football teams also came to support or validate the educational efforts of the institutions. "Certain college presidents," Oriard notes, "openly sought to build their institutions through the publicity won by a successful football team."<sup>(29)</sup>

It was not simply the fans who contributed to the growing fervor surrounding college football and its unique relationship with southern history and culture. The media played a significant role in affirming and exploiting zeal, too. Oriard's work details the role of the media nicely. "Southerners likely competed with no more intensity than players elsewhere," he writes, "but sportswriters both within and outside the region preferred to set them apart, and to attribute their fervor to the undying spirit of the Old South."<sup>(30)</sup> Sportswriters above and below the Mason-Dixon Line used southern history and the relationship of the South to the North to frame key intersectional matchups. "Every intersectional contest pitting the South against the East or Midwest became a small chapter in the developing narrative of southern football," Oriard argues. "Along the way, intersectional contests pitting the South against 'the East' and 'Midwest' came to an end, becoming instead the South versus the North in reenactments of the Civil War."<sup>(31)</sup> He adds: "The identification of Dixie running backs with DeForest's raiders or Pickett's cavalry at Gettysburg began with southern sportswriters but was embraced even more enthusiastically by their Yankee colleagues, as part of the entire nation's romance with the legendary Old South and Lost Cause."<sup>(32)</sup> Thus, "[l]inking southern football to the myths of the Old South and the Lost Cause began in Dixie . . . but it was taken up everywhere."<sup>(33)</sup>

Historian Patrick B. Miller identifies several ways in which intercollegiate athletics (most especially football) became inextricably linked with southern history and culture. For example, the idea of honor has played a prominent role in defining the region. Honor also shaped the rise of intercollegiate athletics in the South in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. "Rough and romantic, like the martial valor representing the legend of the Lost Cause, athletic exploits thus could give young men a sense of exhilarating contest and conflict in battle," Miller argues. "This was a shadow perhaps of what their fathers might have recalled from their exploits at Vicksburg and Gettysburg, but it was a deeper experience than marching on a parade ground might ever provide."<sup>(34)</sup> The honor that student athletes defended included personal honor and the honor of the South or the Confederacy. But the players also defended the honor of the institution for which they played. "The care and tending of an individual's honor many southerners had long understood," Miller claims. "[T]hrough athletics, some believed, the prestige of an entire institution might similarly need to be protected."<sup>(35)</sup> Cash writes, for example, that even into the 1930s there "were still plenty of Southern colleges whose only claim to respect was a football team."<sup>(36)</sup> The educational institution, of course, often has represented the state and the state has represented the region to some extent, so all these powerful allegiances tended to be and perhaps still are bound together.

Football was a sport that naturally could draw upon the regional emphasis on honor. But how it did so may have distinguished it from other sports. Football, Miller writes, "stood as a means of expressing or even inculcating the

qualities of strength, endurance, and valor deemed highly honorable by generations of cultural commentators."<sup>(37)</sup> As such, the game "possessed enormous metaphorical value concerning the rites of passage toward southern manhood, and it clearly corresponded with the region's martial culture and tradition of blood sport."<sup>(38)</sup> On this latter point, Oriard agrees.<sup>(39)</sup> He argues that football was American society's general response to living conditions that were less strenuous and included more leisure time. In such a situation there arose the concern that boys would grow up "soft" or even "effeminate."<sup>(40)</sup> This anxiety was alleviated by their participation in the rough and tumble world of football. While concern about manliness may have played some role in southerners' participation in the sport, the region's history and cultural attitudes suggest there was more going on than this gendered anxiety thesis suggests.

While the athletes in intercollegiate sports in the South had especially powerful motivations for playing—including performing to the point of serious injury or even death—spectators (especially students) also became participants in what Miller describes as a sacrament. He writes:

[A] myriad of rituals and symbols reinforced for many southerners the intensity of the intercollegiate sporting experience. The anthems and totems of college athletic culture in the South took a variety of forms and projected a range of images . . . The iconography of college sport, manifest in the waving of flags, the orchestration of chants and cheers, and the singing of inspirational songs, formed circles of significance around the actual sites of races or games, actively involving fans as well as participants in the intercollegiate sporting spectacle. The sights and sounds of boisterous athletics went beyond competitive exchange on the diamond or gridiron; those who watched became immersed in something like a sacrament against which a book, a lecture, or a laboratory experiment—among other academic offerings—often seemed to pale in comparison.<sup>(41)</sup>

As a sacrament the intercollegiate sporting event became an important communal event. "Distinctive colors, nicknames, mascots, songs, and cheers intensified the experience of a Saturday afternoon," Miller observes. "Beyond the contest itself, even before the era when homecoming extravaganzas and precision marching bands added to the appeal of sporting events, other rituals contributed to an exciting atmosphere. From an early date, college baseball and football games in the South frequently became extended social occasions, offering to some a splendid opportunity for courtship, to others a fine setting for displays of prowess with a bottle."<sup>(42)</sup> These social occasions built upon preexisting customs in southern culture. Loran Smith, a southern writer with a long-time connection to the athletic department at the University of Georgia, remembers people coming to Athens for the day with picnic baskets to feast before the game. He notes that this likely drew upon the popular practice of "dinner on the green," or large communal feasts that often took place after church on a Sunday afternoon. The picnics that Smith witnessed are now massive and complex tailgating scenes, with all of their feasting and courting and drinking. In other words, tailgating may very well be a case of an activity that stereotypically is associated with a religious occasion having been adapted to an increasingly popular "secular" event.

Historian Ted Ownby argues that sports were not central to southern manhood through most of the 20th century. In contrast to Oriard's claims about football and ideas of manhood in American culture (especially during the late 19th and early 20th centuries), Ownby claims that most southerners did not conceive of football as important in relation to manhood and really did not identify manhood with any particular sport. "[I]t becomes almost ridiculous," he argues, "to think about sports as playing a significant role in the works that analyzed southern identity at mid-century [1900s]."<sup>(43)</sup> While acknowledging that football might tap into traditional southern attitudes about honor, Ownby still insists: "it seems clear that modern sports offer white southern men a sense of regional identity that has little to do with southern history."<sup>(44)</sup>

Ownby's conclusion (at least as it applies to football) rightly cautions us to be wary of making broad generalizations about sport or football in southern history and culture. The most significant southern writers rarely if ever used football as a setting or plot element. William Faulkner did not (*The Hamlet* being one exception).<sup>(45)</sup> James Agee's literary ethnography *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is a powerful account of life in rural 1930s Alabama. This was one of the great decades for Crimson Tide football, yet the team is never mentioned in the approximately 400-page text. Football does play a more significant role in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946); Governor Willie Stark's son is a star on the state university's team. Of course, the socioeconomic status of the characters in Warren's novel are significantly different from that of both the many characters in Faulkner's tales of the decaying South and Agee's poor sharecroppers of the 1930s. Wayne Flynt, a leading scholar of Alabama history, argues that in Alabama (and this most likely applies throughout the South) "[f]anaticism for the sport depended on high concentrations of alumni who were college football fans. Such concentrations presumed lots of white-collar jobs and college graduates."<sup>(46)</sup> The fact of the matter is that there just were not that many people like that throughout much of the twentieth century. Ownby, then, may very well

be correct in his assessment that sports or football had little impact on the lives of many if not most southern men. Yet, Oriard and others may very well be correct in arguing that for some southerners—particularly the increasing number of whites able to attend college in the 20th century, and who would have the wealth and leisure to support and enjoy contemporary sports—football became central to how they understood themselves, their history, and their culture.

Not everyone in the South was thrilled about the increasing popularity of college football in the region. Many leaders of the religious establishment railed against the game and the wild behavior of fans. In particular, the violence on the gridiron and the drinking of the spectators ran counter to the sensibilities of the devout. After World War I, however, much of the evangelical opposition to the sport diminished.<sup>(47)</sup>

However broad or narrow the appeal of college football was to southerners in the late 19th century and the first several decades of the 20th century, there is no doubt that it became a regional obsession in the second half of the 20th century and perhaps for many of the same reasons that it had caught on in the first place. Twentieth-century southerners experienced a great deal of anxiety. Entering that century southerners still felt the sting of the defeat from the Civil War and the trauma of Reconstruction. Poverty, infant mortality, low life expectancy, and illiteracy left them with a distinct feeling of inferiority with regard to other regions of the country. The encroachment of industrialization and commercialization from the North, embodied in part in the New South movement, was perceived by some southerners as a threat to their way of life and gave rise to the reactionary southern agrarian movement. By mid century, the South's oppressed and politically silent and ignored segment of the population (African Americans) refused en masse to be oppressed, silent, and ignored any longer. Thus, whites' anxiety increased exponentially as the stable, reassuring hierarchy of race began to crumble and white manhood was seemingly challenged.

As the civil rights era got underway, whites responded in part with a resurgence of Confederate and Lost Cause symbolism.<sup>(48)</sup> Many of them thought federal intervention to end segregation was another Yankee invasion. Major college football teams at the time were all white, and some remained so even until the 1970s. As James Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962, Governor Ross Barnett (an alumnus of Ole Miss) offered a strident defense of segregation in a speech titled "I Love Mississippi"—delivered to fans just before an Ole Miss football game. Because the state college football teams were so integral to the identity of white southerners, integration of teams was a matter of central concern. Segregation on the major college football teams was a way of reaffirming racial hierarchy and a white southern worldview.

The pressures to end segregation were great—both from other regions of the country as well as from blacks and supportive whites in the South. Southern football programs found it increasingly difficult to compete with integrated teams from other regions. Intersectional games were nearly impossible for many teams, given the proscription against playing integrated games. College bowl games—and the desire of southerners to see their teams take part—played a significant role in getting many southerners to overcome their racism in order to participate in these important college football events. As historian Charles H. Martin observes, "the triumph of pragmatism and self-interest that integrated bowl games embodied reflected a strong desire by most white southerners to participate fully in the national sporting culture, rather than maintain an extreme regional identity and risk further marginalization and isolation. Thus each year on the sacred day of January 1 [when many bowl games are played], if not necessarily on the other 364 days, Dixie had become 'Americanized.'"<sup>(49)</sup>

Change was sometimes slow. With the waning of the civil rights movement, racial tensions continued to surface in frightening ways. Violence still erupted. Sometimes racial issues were simply ignored—both in the broader society and in the world of college football. In Russ Bebb's book *The Big Orange: A Story of Tennessee Football*, published in 1973, hardly a word is mentioned about the segregation and integration of the team. It is almost as if segregation never happened and integration was always the norm.

If change was slow in coming, it often was dramatic. The renowned southern historian C. Vann Woodward writes "Not overnight, to be sure, and not without exceptions and lingering relics of the past, but with remarkable speed, the bonds of the rigid, age-hardened code of racial 'etiquette' signifying white supremacy and black inferiority fell away."<sup>(50)</sup> And perhaps nowhere was this more dramatic than on sports teams. Certainly racism still existed and for a long time blacks found it difficult to win certain starting positions (e.g., quarterback) or become head coaches. Condredge Holloway was the first black starting quarterback in the Southeastern Conference, leading the Tennessee Volunteers in 1972—several years after integration of SEC football had begun. And it was not until 2004 that there was a black head coach in the SEC—when former Alabama star Sylvester Croom took over at Mississippi State. Though these changes certainly did not occur as swiftly and justly as anyone would wish, the inherent meritocracy of sports still provided an important vehicle for blacks in the South to attain some degree of equality and acceptance in the mainstream culture.

Charles Reagan Wilson notes that "[s]tudies of southern mythology have proliferated in recent years, but few of them deal with the modern period and none with the importance of sports to the regional psyche."<sup>(51)</sup> He adds that sports (especially football) "are providing images for a new pantheon of southern heroes. Sports figures, perhaps even more than musicians, are becoming prime icons of the modern South, the way the Confederate veterans were heroes in the late nineteenth century."<sup>(52)</sup> But unlike Confederate veterans, blacks and white fans alike—regardless of the color of the hero's skin—venerate today's sports heroes. Wilson argues that the 1970s and 1980s saw a revitalization of southern culture, one that identified with the past (the Lost Cause) but embraced a more inclusive future. This revitalization could be seen in sporting life "and especially in college football. The god of southern football is a tribal god, a god of the Chosen People. When [an integrated] Alabama played Notre Dame in the 1970s, southerners from many states waved the flag and rooted for their legions against the Yankees."<sup>(53)</sup>

Certainly divisions between whites and blacks in the South remain today, and thus we still may speak of two civil religions. At the same time, much has changed to bring the two races together. While college football has been an important part of the culture and life of historically black colleges and universities throughout the twentieth century, college football at the major state institutions (receiving greater state funding and attention) throughout much of the century could only be described as an element of white southern civil religion. However, it increasingly has become an integral part of black southern civil religion as well. In other words, it perhaps has led to a broader southern civil religion that transcends racial divisions.

### *Football, Music, and Southern Civil Religion*

The point of this essay has been to suggest how college football in the South was woven closely into the very fabric of the culture and its history—at least for many southerners.<sup>(54)</sup> What we get in the end is an understanding of a southern civil religion that has college football as a key component. Of course, we simply could have *experienced* the phenomenon by attending a game on an autumn Saturday in the South. Here are three examples, highlighting the ways that music and ritual bring various elements of the southern civil religion together for fans in powerful moments of communal worship.

First, there is the song "Rocky Top" at the University of Tennessee. No song is perhaps more associated with a school or played so often as is "Rocky Top"—a 1967 country classic most notably performed by the Osborne Brothers. While it may not be the only song played on game day, it nevertheless is the centerpiece of the music for the day.



In this video, one can see and hear how the Tennessee marching band's pre-game performance in September 2005 attached fans to a series of local, regional, and national motifs. The video begins with the playing of the alma maters of Tennessee and their opponent, the University of Alabama at Birmingham. These songs stress the identification of the fans with their particular institutions. The alma maters are followed by "Rocky Top" (accompanied by the singing of the fans). After "Rocky Top" comes "Stars and Stripes Forever," a song of national importance that shifts the focus from the more limited civil religion of the South to the greater civil religion of the nation. Finally, there is the connection of the fans to their school and state with the performance of the Tennessee fight song as the team comes running through the "T" formed by the band.

One can sense the fervor of the fans through the roar of the crowd, and this reaction should not be surprising given the excitement about the beginning of the game and how the band draws on powerful civil religion themes.

The lyrics to "Rocky Top" emphasize a kind of upcountry earthiness as well as the simplicity and goodness of life on a mythical mountain in East Tennessee. For example:

Wish that I was on ol' Rocky Top,  
down in the Tennessee hills;  
Ain't no smoggy smoke on Rocky Top;  
Ain't no telephone bills;

Once I had a girl on Rocky Top;  
Half bear, other half cat;  
Wild as a mink, but sweet as soda pop,  
I still dream about that . . .

Once two strangers climbed ol' Rocky Top,  
Lookin' for a moonshine still;  
Strangers ain't come down from Rocky Top;  
Reckon they never will;  
Corn won't grow at all on Rocky Top;  
Dirt's too rocky by far;  
That's why all the folks on Rocky Top  
get their corn from a jar . . .

The final verse even compares the humble rural life on Rocky Top to the very different life in America's cities—perhaps Yankee cities in particular.

I've had years of cramped-up city life  
Trapped like a duck in a pen;  
All I know is it's a pity life  
Can't be simple again.

"Rocky Top" is played dozens of times during a Tennessee football game—especially after a score or critical defensive play. The result often is an ecstatic frenzy among the fans. While the verses of the song are rarely sung, fans enthusiastically join in with the chorus:

Rocky Top, you'll always be  
home sweet home to me;  
Good ol' Rocky Top;  
Rocky Top, Tennessee;  
Rocky Top, Tennessee.

Here we have the typical defiance of the South and pride in its unique characteristics, affirmed in the communal ritual of the southern college football game, and expressed by nearly 100,000 fans singing in unison about who they are. They also sing about the team that represents their beliefs, their school, their state, and their region.

Next, there is the medley of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Dixie" played at Ole Miss. The irony, of course, is that a Yankee hymn like the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" would even be a part of an Ole Miss marching band medley. However, the song's religious ("Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord") and militaristic ("He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword") themes fit well with the southern ethos. "Dixie," on the other hand, is perhaps the most well-known musical celebration of the southern past.

O, I wish I was in the land of cotton  
Old times there are not forgotten  
Look away! Look away!  
Look away! Dixie Land.

Combined, these two songs stir the hearts and minds of fans in Oxford, Mississippi—home of William Faulkner, the Ole Miss Rebels, and perhaps the one place in the South that most embraces and celebrates southern identity.



A particularly moving moment occurs at the end of a game. In this video, we see such a moment after a hard-fought Mississippi loss to Alabama in the fall of 2005. While some fans leave the stadium, a large portion (particularly the student section near where the band sits) stays for a final playing of the medley. It begins slowly, mournfully (particularly appropriate after a tough loss)—the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Dixie" gently mixing together. One feels a sense of longing—longing for a past more ideal than real.



Midway through, the tempo picks up, hands are clapping, and the parts that include the fans singing (particularly the chorus of "Dixie") are louder and more boisterous. This all culminates with a yell, a hope, a declaration of defiance rising from all—"The South will rise again!"

Finally, we have the southern anthem "Sweet Home Alabama"—the Lynyrd Skynyrd classic played at Alabama Crimson Tide games. To understand the song, one first has to remember the historical and cultural context in which it was composed. In 1970, Neil Young recorded a powerful condemnation of southern bigotry and violence: "Southern Man." The song reminds southerners of their vicious past and their present debt to African Americans:

I saw cotton  
and I saw black  
Tall white mansions  
and little shacks.  
Southern man  
when will you  
pay them back?  
I heard screamin'  
and bullwhips cracking  
How long? How long?

In addition, the song points out the white South's deep hypocrisy; its brutal treatment of blacks runs counter to biblical ethics.

Southern man  
better keep your head  
Don't forget  
what your good book said  
Southern change  
gonna come at last  
Now your crosses  
are burning fast  
Southern man

Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama" (first recorded in 1974) was partly a response to Young's diatribe (as well as his later song "Alabama"), but also was a response to the harsh (even if deserved) media attention on the South in the 1960s and early 1970s. In some ways the song served as an apology for the South, an insistence that good people were trying to do the best they could.

In Birmingham they love the governor [controversial segregationist George Wallace]  
Now we all did what we could do

The song also points out an apparent contradiction of those outside the South, those in Washington, D.C., who condemn the immoral South, but regularly engage in unethical behavior.

Now Watergate does not bother me  
Does your conscience bother you?  
Tell the truth

But mostly the song strikes a chord of defiance, and, in stereotypical fashion, seeks to defend the honor of the South.

Well I heard Mister Young sing about her  
Well, I heard ol' Neil put her down  
Well, I hope Neil Young will remember  
A southern man don't need him around anyhow

"Sweet Home Alabama" is heard often at Crimson Tide football games. Booming through the public address

system at Bryant-Denny Stadium in Tuscaloosa, tens of thousands of Alabama fans roar their approval when the song is played. In the middle of the chorus the crowd declares its loyalty not only to the beloved Crimson Tide but also to its state and culture—inserting "Roll Tide Roll" into breaks in the chorus.

Sweet home Alabama;  
[ROLL TIDE ROLL]  
Where skies are so blue;  
Sweet home Alabama;  
[ROLL TIDE ROLL]  
Lord I'm coming home to you.

With all its foibles, the song indicates, the South is still a good place to be. And, just like the Crimson Tide, it can achieve greatness.

### *Conclusion*

Southern civil religion is celebrated in music—hymns and southern rock, country and traditional/folk. It is church and community—and food, lots of food. It has a history of courage, stubbornness, honor, and shame. It is the Lost Cause—sometimes racist, despicable, and divisive. For example, the playing of "Dixie" and the chanting of "The South will rise again" continues to be controversial and divisive among students, faculty, and fans at Ole Miss. At the same time, southern civil religion—emerging out of the Lost Cause but not restricted to it—provides a pride in southern identity that can be uplifting and uniting once stripped of its offensive (Confederate) trappings. And woven into this civil religion is college football, drawing from and adding to these elements and often holding them all together at once on beautiful autumn Saturdays in towns and cities all across the South.<sup>(55)</sup>

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  20. Reed, *My Tears*, 142.
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  34. Patrick B. Miller, "The Manly, the Moral, and the Proficient: College Sports in the New South," in *The Sporting World of the*

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35. Miller, "The Manly," 35.

36. Cash, *Mind of the South*, 373.

37. Miller, "The Manly," 24.

38. Miller, "The Manly," 24.

39. Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 3.

40. Women, of course, would find their own place in the world of football as cheerleaders. See Oriard, *King Football*, 181-188.

41. Miller, "The Manly," 29-30.

42. Miller, "The Manly," 33.

43. Ted Ownby, "Manhood, Memory, and White Men's Sports in the American South" in *The Sporting World of the Modern South*, edited by Patrick B. Miller (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 328.

44. Ownby, "Manhood," 338, 339.

45. In his novel *The Hamlet* (set in the early 20th century), William Faulkner creates a character that grows up in an isolated, rural area, but has the opportunity to attend the University of Mississippi. While at school, the young man discovers the game of football. Though he knew nothing of the game beforehand, it clearly is very important to those associated with the university. But the people back home have no awareness of the game either. The story reminds us that though college football was growing greatly in popularity in the 1920s and 1930s in the South, many southerners would not have had much interest in it or perhaps did not even know about it.

46. Wayne Flynt, *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2004) 429.

47. For a nice summary of this religious history, see chapter 5 ("When Dixie Took a Different Stand") of William J. Baker's *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). And for an interesting case study that deals with some of these issues, see Andrew Doyle's "'Fighting Whiskey and Immorality' at Auburn: The Politics of Southern Football, 1919-1927" in *Southern Cultures* (vol. 10, no. 3, Fall 2004).

48. Charles Reagan Wilson, *Judgment & Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths From Faulkner to Elvis* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995) 25.

49. Charles H. Martin, "Integrating New Year's Day: The Racial Politics of College Bowl Games in the American South" in *The Sporting World of the Modern South*, edited by Patrick B. Miller (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 195.

50. C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, 3rd edition (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1993) 245.

51. Wilson, *Judgment*, 44.

52. Wilson, *Judgment*, 50-1.

53. Wilson, *Judgment*, 27-8.

54. For a fuller account, see chapter five of my forthcoming *Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South* (Mercer University Press).

55. In my forthcoming *Game Day and God: Football, Faith, and Politics in the American South*, I deal more critically with how race and economic class issues are part of southern civil religion—particularly as they are fused with the past and present phenomena of major college football.

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