

[Rabin on Sullivan and Hampton, 'Varieties of Southern Religious History: Essays in Honor of Donald G. Mathews'](#)

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Regina D. Sullivan, Monte Harrell Hampton, eds. *Varieties of Southern Religious History: Essays in Honor of Donald G. Mathews*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015. 296 pp. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61117-489-2.

Reviewed by Shari L. Rabin (College of Charleston) **Published on** H-AmRel (April, 2016)
Commissioned by Bobby L. Smiley

This festschrift, *Varieties of Southern Religious History*, begins with an introductory essay describing the historical approach of Donald G. Mathews--professor emeritus of history at the University of North Carolina and author of *Religion in the Old South* (1977) among other works on religion, politics, and violence--as one of "humble access." He comes to his subjects, we are told, with determined sensitivity and skepticism, buttressed by a spirituality of inadequacy (the term "humble access" is taken from the Book of Common Prayer). It is appropriate, then, that this volume takes its title, albeit without comment and without the definite article, from the most influential study of the psychology of religion, William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. For James, religion is, famously, "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." [1] This universal phenomenon, he argues, comes to be expressed through distinctive personality types. Some of us are the healthy-minded "once-born," while others are sick souls, pessimistic and neurotic, who must be born twice in order to achieve contentment. James's account is littered with religious characters including saints, religious geniuses, mystics, and converts, whose diverse encounters with "religious experience" he explores through direct quotations recounting individual lives.

Without diagnosing Mathews--although the introduction does note that he is a convert from Methodism to Episcopalianism--it seems that for him it is not only historical subjects who are "individual men in their solitude," but also the historians themselves. Whether all of the essays collected here rise (or descend?) to the humility of their authors' teacher, however, the book's title is apt in that it is filled with diverse micro-historical portraits, over half of them biographical.

A fascinating contribution from Emily Bingham, for example, describes the life of her great-aunt, Kentucky flapper Henrietta Bingham, who underwent psychological treatments for homosexual tendencies in Jazz-Age London while also performing southernness for her cadre of posh friends and lovers. Daniel R. Miller's enlightening essay highlights the transnational connections and local strategies of the leaders of the Christian Reformed Church of Cuba. While the promise of "variety" certainly pans out, then, it should be clear from these examples that this is not strictly a volume on "southern religious history." Not all of the essays take place in the American South or deal with religion. Quite a few also stray from a strictly historical method, ranging from an analysis of memory and cultural representation--W. Thomas Mainwaring's essay on the Underground Railroad--to sustained engagements with social scientific concepts. For instance, Mary Frederickson traces anthropologist Ernest Becker's concept of the "denial of death" through letters across three different

eras in southern history. Of the fifteen essays, then, ranging in length from nine pages to twenty-seven and organized roughly chronologically, only eight deal historically with religion in the South, and they tend to wear their regionalism lightly, as a setting rather than a problematic or a conceptual framework.

What kind of Jamesian composite of its topic does this volume offer, then? Whether or not the southern religious actors featured were saints, religious geniuses, or mystics, born once or twice, these essays show that they were hardly solitary. Some of the best tell tales of unrealized hopes and unintended consequences. Whether they were seeking religious purpose in the wilderness, trying to free themselves of sin, or exerting public religious influence, the results were not what they had hoped. Philip N. Mulder describes how Methodist Lorenzo Dow and Baptist John Taylor helped grow their denominations, but never quite found personal resolution. In freeing their slaves in post-Revolutionary North Carolina, Larry E. Tise tells us, Quakers inadvertently inspired strict anti-manumission laws that strengthened the state's brutal racial inequalities. And David J. Voelker's Kentucky Presbyterians, in insisting on the doctrinal orthodoxy of Transylvania University, ultimately contributed to its defunding. In southern religious history, it seems, good intentions never went unpunished.

In addition to disappointed white male Christians, this volume features some remarkable outsiders who found an audience in the antebellum South, even if only temporarily. Black Methodist preacher Henry Evans, Methodist newspaperwoman Frances Bumpass, and spiritualist Church of Christ minister Jesse Babcock Ferguson were unexpectedly successful religious leaders. And yet, as described by Monte Harrell Hampton and Nancy Gray Schoonmaker, respectively, Evans's biracial church resegregated after his death, and Ferguson was basically driven out of his church by a vocal minority. Only Bumpass, the white woman, had more lasting success, expertly weathering a newspaper war over women's preaching and expanding her influence in its aftermath, as Cheryl F. Junk describes.

Southern religion, in this portrait, is not as exclusive, monolithic, or triumphant as it is often caricatured, but it is nonetheless firmly denominational and institutional. Many of the essays directly and indirectly reflect the continuing influence of Nathan O. Hatch's democratization thesis, describing expanded religious authority and new modes of itinerancy and print culture. Some scholars might take issue with this approach, pointing to the hierarchical and disciplinary dimensions of southern religious institutions. Others, steeped in newer religious studies methodologies, might depict a southern religious history in which ritual practice, secular formations, non-Christian religions, and racial violence play a more central role.

To some extent this volume does point to broader understandings of its titular categories. At various points we get glimpses of the transnational South, of the religious dimensions of southern secularism, and of historical studies that engage with theory. But the authors themselves do not make these arguments and for the most part the essays are just too far afield to lend the volume a clear focus. What is problematic in an edited collection, however, is arguably a virtue in a festschrift. This book may not demonstrate the "varieties of southern religious history," but it does live up to its subtitle: "Essays in Honor of Donald G. Mathews." The book includes as appendices lists of the dissertations he has directed and of his own publications, which along with the many fine essays in this volume, constitute an impressive and wide-ranging legacy.

Note

[1]. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern library, 1902), 31.

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