

Holifield, E. Brooks. *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978. x + 262 pp. \$14.75.

Southern religion appears in the popular stereotype as highly emotional, anti-intellectual, and rural. In this volume, E. Brooks Holifield of Candler School of Theology, Emory University, counteracts this image by presenting an aspect of Southern religious history that has been largely unrecognized.

Holifield argues that many clergymen in the cities and towns of the Old South viewed themselves as exponents and defenders of rational orthodoxy. To establish this thesis, he first examines the social setting within which these ministers worked. Virtually all of the one hundred elite clergymen he studied lived in urban areas and served congregations drawn from the mercantile and professional classes. Since many individuals in these congregations aspired to gentility, it is not surprising that the clergy developed similar goals and, one of the marks of gentility being rationality, set out to show that orthodox religion fitted within a rational world-view.

Through their sermons and books these clergymen—representing the Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic communions—argued from the paradoxical premise that revelation undergirds reason, while reason verifies revelation. In making their case, the “Gentlemen Theologians” drew on several lines of argument: the consistency and power of Scripture, miracles and prophecy, Scottish Common-Sense Realism that stated that the finitude of reason made revelation necessary, the social utility of morality, the pedagogical usefulness of the sacraments, and the necessity of the atonement to preserve the “moral government” of the universe. Holifield concludes that this theology attracted and reassured people that “reasonable behavior,” an element in their self-identity that sometimes seemed at odds with Southern culture, “was congruent with the deepest nature of things” (p. 206). Furthermore, he states, this rational orthodoxy lies behind both religious liberalism and fundamentalism in the South.

The author’s argument is virtually impossible to fault. He has chosen his one hundred ministers on the basis of carefully considered characteristics that establish them as members of an elite. The analysis of this group as a class and their place in the urban social setting is based on a wide variety of sources: tax and census records, newspapers and magazines, unpublished correspondence, and published works. The theological analysis that comprises chaps. 3-8 draws largely on published sermons, articles, and books. In addition to thoroughly documenting his argument, Holifield takes pains to point out its limits: he is writing about an elite class, not

“typical” Southern preachers. He has helped us to see that Southern religion was (and is) complex, and one element in that complexity was an urban-oriented rational orthodoxy.

Beyond this general contribution, *The Gentlemen Theologians* is instructive for a number of other reasons as well. First, it shows that the sociological methodology so influential in contemporary historical studies can fruitfully complement, rather than oppose, the traditional dependence on literary sources. This observation leads to a second, that the history of theology is illuminated when examined within its larger social and intellectual setting. Holifield’s argument that these theologians formed their theology in response to the needs of their social class might seem a truism in one sense—all thinking takes place within a social setting—, but much theological history has examined ideas in isolation from society. This study suggests that more theologically oriented historians can usefully combine social and theological history. Third, Holifield’s analysis of the role the Scottish Common-Sense Philosophy of Thomas Reid played in the thought of these Southerners reinforces our growing awareness of its importance in American intellectual life. Where previous studies, recently popularized by Garry Wills’s *Inventing America*, have shown the basic place of Common-Sense Realism in eighteenth-century thought, Holifield’s work indicates its continuing importance into the middle of the nineteenth century.

*The Gentlemen Theologians* is a thoroughly researched, carefully written work that will be of interest to American church, social, and intellectual historians. It should prompt further reexamination of Southern religion and comparative studies of the North and West.

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Moore, R. Laurence. *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. xvii + 310 pp. \$14.95.

Despite spiritualism’s popularity in nineteenth-century America, there have been few histories of the movement that are useful to the scholar. In this work, R. Laurence Moore of Cornell University examines both spiritualism and parapsychology in order to understand their function or meaning in the American past. He does not, however, attempt to provide a complete history of these movements.

Moore argues that spiritualism, perhaps the most popular cultural phenomenon of the 1850s, was both a reaction against the materialistic