

Bible Belt Baptists. Working towards Prosperity and Salvation

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The South United States has often proclaimed itself as the last American bastion of authentic Christianity. There the teachings of Christ merged with a substrate of ultraconservative Anabaptist model of ecclesiastic and social organization.

All of this is being topped by the reminiscences of the postcolonial racial hierarchy which resulted in the formation of a community model that has as trait marks hetero-determination, unclear boundaries between social and religious norms and a high desire for social validation of one's worth. This paper attempts to highlight the social implication of religiosity on social and economic order in the South's agrarian communities.

Christianity is often held as synonymous with the model of social inclusion, common property and equalitarianism. Prosperity and social growth is directly linked with the quality of the men-God relationship, the prosperity of one's cornfields being credited to the mercy and blessing that God had granted.

From an anthropological perspective, the *work-prosperity-blessing equation* represents a structural component of communal social balance, through divine intervention, the healthy growth of crops was assured, thus the well being of the whole community.

Anthropologists may explain this need for *help from the exterior* as comparable to a type of insurance. This was needed mainly for two reasons, in the case of rural communities, families got their revenue, in the majority of cases, from a single economic activity which was connected to agriculture or livestock. This model presented a high risk for families in periods in which environmental factors weren't too favorable for the healthy growth of the crops, food shortages and financial downfalls being the result. The second reason is that of divine intervention, this one is a little more complex than the first one, even so, it gravitates around the idea of mutual exchanges between the two parties involved: men and God.

The mutual exchange has a validation aim to man, it validates the existence of the unseen being that it is worshiped by him, in this case as in many others, God's existence is validated through a praxeological perspective rather through visual contact. In other words, *God exists because he does things. We prayed to Him to give us healthy crops and He did*, something along those lines. From a scientific point of view, every action that is carried out by an individual is done in order to gain something. It has a plausible reason behind it and is the subject of reciprocity. Acknowledging this leads us to questioning the authenticity of men's devotion towards God, shouldn't this devotion be carried out without expecting something in return? Is the bound governed by the same natural laws that are applied in the natural world? Or is reciprocity a law in its own right that is meant to keep a balance in the human society? Taking into account all that was mentioned in the lines from above, there is a close connection between Church, religious belief and social structure. The focus of this paper will be that of analyzing the connection between the primitive Anabaptist model of community organization, which traces its origins in XVIth century Europe, and the present-day social layering and functions attached to the communities from the US' predominantly Baptist South.

An important point of this paper is that of analyzing the way in which the Anabaptist model was implemented within the Baptist South, the mutations that it was subject of, and some of the critical differences that emerged between the social structures present in the American communities that trace their ideological background to the Anabaptist and the Anabaptist communities from Europe.

Another focus of this paper will consist of shading a light on the relation between life cycles and self identity in the context of the high peer pressure that is used in traditionalist evangelical communities as a stimulant for social conformity. America's bastion of conservative Christianity, widely known as the *Bible Belt*, has often been the target of waves of criticism in the democrat affiliated media, the states of *the bastion* being labeled as Christian-centric, prone towards the encouragement of bigotry and discriminatory policies directed towards those who do not share the traditionalist Christian ideals of the majority. Quite often human flaws are highlighted to the fullest and used in outline and agenda "Man is totally depraved. The corruption extends to every part and faculty of his being "(Taylor, 1993:8).

Known for their traditionalist views on social structure and order, the states of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Texas represent the perfect candidates that could take part in socio-cultural analysis of the USA's conservative Baptist communities.

An in depth understanding of the complex social network that joins together, and blurs from time to time the border between church and social normativity within the Deep South, can be obtained only through

understanding the rigorous tenets that congregationalism imposed within numerous communities, especially if we are talking about rural communities and small towns. Congregationalism aimed at diffusing centrally-held church authority by giving local churches, organized in congregations, the possibility of fully managing their internal affairs, and even adopting slightly different theological views than other congregations that are part of the same church.

The Anabaptist model, term which will be frequently used in this paper, does not make a direct reference towards a specific set of doctrine, it rather tries to explain the role that they played in the coming into being of the Christian Anabaptist lifestyle. Anabaptist theology, in its modern form, retained only a single teaching that is held by all the movements that trace their origins to the Radical Reform of the XVIth century, many protestant groups having as ancestors the “*re-baptizers...it was given to 16th-century Christians who saw little value in infant baptism and, therefore, baptized each other as adults upon confession of faith*” (Palmer, 2010:1). This can be considered the most representative theological doctrine that is still in use up to this day within all Anabaptist congregations is that of the rejection of infant baptism, this distinctive theological point being regarded as the ideological core of the movement. Some theology schools are still debating the actual classification of the Anabaptist movement. It should be mentioned that there are two camps that hold conflicting position in regards to the position of the movement within the waves of reforms of the XVIth century. The first camp states that the Anabaptist movement is an integral part of the Reformation, the difference between it and the mainstream protestant movement that arose from the Reform is its *radical – restorationist* character. Those who sustain this idea claim that even thou the movement is ideologically quite different from the Reformation, the Reformation was the one that gave the necessary impulse for the birth of the movement. The second camp puts an emphasis on the ideological profile of the Anabaptist movement, stating that the movement cannot be assimilated to the Reformation, even thou, in the present-day USA the churches that follow Anabaptist teachings are labeled as protestant. Traditionalism is regarded as a requirement for keeping a social balance within the community; traditionalism, the way in which it is present in the Bible Belt, is composed of rigid norms which often have a “*single-way result*”, “*failure to live up to the colony’s rules will bring strappings to children*” (Satterlee, 2001:7).

Through the homogeneous character of the South’s confessional and ideological landscape, it tends to create rigid, exclusivist and *expulsion prone* local cultures. Even if the religious managed to exert a significant influence on shaping the South’s political doctrine, an essential aspect should not be ignored: The influence is attributed to *Conservative Evangelical Christianity* as a system of belief, not being attributed to a certain Christian Evangelical denomination. Going back to the Anabaptist model and the

ideological differences between it and the present-day configuration of the South's social landscape, we must take in to consideration a number of socio-historical factors that greatly contributed to the rift. It all can be beautifully translated in a graphic form through an axis that has as its starting point, the rising of the Anabaptist movement, and which continues from that point on to the present-day.

Historically speaking, there is quite of a controversy when it comes to tracing the exact origins of the Baptist movement, each theory trying to defend or to highlight the noble and unstained ancestry of the Baptist churches, even so, history is proving to have a different story "He found much church history-- most of it seemed to be about the Catholics and Protestants. The history of Baptists, he discovered, was written in blood" (Carol, 200:6). The most traditionalist Baptists claim that their churches are part of an unbroken chain of beliefs, traditions and practices that date back to the time of Christ. This theory is also known as *Baptist perpetuity*, even if it is backed up from many Church members, it does not enjoy that much support from the exterior.

In the case of the Baptist, *the unbroken chain theory* is also supported through the similarities that the present-day Baptists have with some groups that practiced *anti-paedobaptist* teachings.

The usage of this similarities as plausible evidence for sustaining the *Baptist perpetuity* would easily come across a major problem: a disconnection between self-identification of those groups and present-day Baptists.

The rejection of the baptism of infants acted as a social label for the Anabaptists, their name, which was given by the non-members, emphasized this practice which stood up back in those days from the ones that were in use by the followers of the Reform and of the Catholic Church.

The central teaching of the Christian faith is the love towards the others, towards the gentiles, if we want to make contextualize it with the social realities of the biblical Israel.

Jack H. Williams states in his book, *The Bible and the Baptist Church*, that even thou the Baptists don't have a Church history as long as that of some other Churches, they have some "relatives" that were influential back in the early Christian days.

Being a Baptist is presented nowadays as both complex and multidimensional. It is not only a faith, a religion, a set of doctrines and practices; it is a lifestyle which is meant to balance out man's desire for material gain and to reconnect him with the most relevant aim for a Christian, Salvation. This presentation tries to emphasize the benefits of following a certain religion through the beneficial changes that it can bring into one's life.

This naturally gets linked to a need for social validation, which comes into play when a denomination tries to use the media in order to spread its message and to gain new followers. Such techniques are common

among modern-day American Baptists, in fact, we can make a connection between this and a verse from the Gospel of Mark :“And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” [Mark 16:15]. In connection to this, we can add an important teaching that became increasingly popular during the Anabaptist movement: the *priesthood of all believers*.

This new perspective in regards to the priesthood paved the way for a new generation of preachers, ones that won't follow the old rules of the games, ones that will aim at spreading the Word of God in ways which will make it understandable to people from any corner of the world.

The American Baptists managed to transfer their message into the media, thus creating in time very own *Christian media culture* which is represented by a number of radio/TV shows, magazines and books. Televangelism, a term that is quite familiar to many Americans, being connected with zealous preachers of some protestant denomination, being labeled as a modern component of the American protestant tradition.

Televangelists are “designed” to help their audiences to reconnect with God and hear His Word, their speech is often filled with enthusiasm and emotion. This way, they manage to bring together verbal and nonverbal communication for the purpose of offering a good understanding on the messages of the holy texts that make the subject of their shows.

The birth and development of televangelism within the Baptist Church was favored by thirst for information and by the *Biblicism* that characterizes the denomination's perspective in regards to the legitimate source of revelation “...was committed to the principle of simplicity on the bases that Jesus himself was a carpenter and not a trained scholar” (Wiens, 2011:5). Even so, modern Baptists tend to be more sacramental than their Anabaptist ancestors but less sacramental than the Catholics. Televangelism can also be analyzed in the context of globalization; as a result of the development of technology and communication, the spread of God's Words has never been easier. Nowadays televangelists do not aim only at making their voice heard only within the US, they broadcast their shows in different countries around the world, thus contributing to the spread of their teachings and to that of *American Christian culture*. Another element that we should mention that is often used by Christian scholars is that of church culture. Regardless if we are mentioning the Primitive Baptists, the Old Regular Baptists, or the General Baptists, they all trace their origins to a single and undivided Christian tradition “The Baptist Church admits that it is a denomination” (Eskew, 2004:1). Some authors present some church practices as being perceived as unpleasant by the youth “The Old Regular Baptist Church offers little to nothing to make young people want to attend. There lies a huge gap between the church and the young” (Maggard, 1950:1). Those differences are the result of the presence of a combination of sociological variables. In

some churches we may find a bigger number of elderly, in others we may find more youth, in others the majority of the believers may be from the middle class, and in some, from below the poverty line.

Church traditions have different manifestations, and as it was mentioned in the line from above, they are the result of the presence of a combination of sociological variables. We will often see quite noticeable differences in the way a funeral is done by the Southern Baptist in comparison to the Old Regular Baptist or to the any African-American Baptist denomination. The Old Regular Baptists of the Appalachians are known for their traditional church culture which relies heavily on group singing. Thus the whole congregation becomes actively involved in the worship of the Lord through the intonation of hymns.

The traditions of the Old Regular Baptists are deeply rooted in the high plains of Eastern Kentucky, their social organization and traditions preserved many features that were also present in the primitive Anabaptist congregations, even so, their theological views are closer to ones of the Calvinists. The same is stated in regards to the Regular Baptists “On the other hand there were the Regular Baptists who opted for more traditional methods of evangelism and were proponents of Calvinist theology” (Flatt, 1994:2). The Southern United States, which mainly overlaps with the Bible Belt, is characterized by high degree of conservatism which results from the predominance of traditionalist conservative Baptist groups, socially speaking, the area holds a number of interesting social characteristics.

An interesting characteristic is the structure of the family, which situates itself in the lines of the nuclear one, and gender roles within the family, many tending to label them as traditionalistic. Even if the structure is predominantly nuclear in the *Bible Belt*, the term traditionalistic does not fit one hundred percent the nature of gender roles in this case.

The traditional family is characterized by a very rigid delimitation of gender roles, the dominance of the patriarchy and the inferior role of women within the economic and social life of their families and of the community. The industrial development of the area combined with the women’s struggle for equal rights resulted in a somewhat symmetric presence of both men and women in the labor market, many women preferring to work in order to assure their families a stable financial ground. When it comes to gender roles, the Southern families are somewhat more inclined towards the traditionalist model in which there are certain tasks for women and certain ones for men, this being even more noticeable in the rural areas. According to the 2007 population census, we can remark also a slight difference in the percentage of college graduates between Southern States and the rest of the more secular US. Mississippi has a 20.1% of people that obtained a bachelors degree in comparison with a 25.2% that is scored by Ohio, or 34.8% that is scored by Vermont, one of the states that has the lowest percentage of religion practitioners. From an epistemological perspective, the conservative communities of the South tend to determine the validity

of information through their non-contradictory relation with the teachings of the Church, thus the Church becomes the institution that detains the right of saying “this is good” and “this is bad”. And even so, one question remains. Why did the Baptist faith grow so much in this area? The answer is simple and complex at the same time, mainly because the growth of popularity of the Baptists in the South US can be attributed to a particular characteristic: functionalism. The transition from Anglicanism to the Baptist faith had at its base a functional aspect. Taking in to account that the area that we are talking about was at that time, and still is today for a big part, predominantly rural and agricultural, a faith that is less sacramental would had come in handy to the lifestyle that revolved around agricultural cycles.

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