

# Strangers and Friends at the Welcome Table: Contemporary Christianities in the American South

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Strangers and Friends at the Welcome Table: Contemporary Christianities in the American South*, By James Hudnut-Beumler, Chapel Hill, NC., University of North Carolina Press., 2018., ISBN. 978-1-4696-4037-2., i-x., 1-289 pp., Hardcover \$27.47.

Hudnut-Beumler presents this fascinating chronicle of Christianity for more than the past 75 years, as an overall image of the dominant religion in some of the Southern states of America. The author narrates experiences, beliefs and faithful practices of Christians in both rural and urban communities. The book is thus a critical analysis of different religious communities, especially their intrinsic difficulties in smoothing down differences connecting to religion, myths, and peculiarity of culture among Christians. This book, therefore, presents the author's notion that to understand Christianity in the twenty-first century; one has to engage diverse perceptions of Christian practices.

The writer narrated his life experiences since childhood when the family traveled from Michigan, to visit relatives in South Webster, Ohio. The author recounts the differences in accent practices, for instance, the high number of small churches along a small main street. The author also recalls unique religious and cultural traditions such as attending church services on Sunday and Wednesday nights, when different church bells rang at different times. Writer, therefore, creates a distinctive impression of the American South, as a place retaining a broad historical sense, concerning differences in race, kinship, faith, myths, and geographical settings. The author tries to find out the intensity of this cultural distinctiveness, and its homogeneity with the contemporary American culture, since the observable differences might be either functionless or essential in the current evolving society.

According to the writer, there is extreme segregation of faith among Christians in the South, whom he refers to as a "religion of the lost cause" that glamorize the civil war. The writer narrates how the white, Protestants and other conservative Christian communities still dominate the South. This narration on religion is fascinating due to the included range of stories concerning practices by different Christian groups, for instance, the rattlesnakes and holiness. The author also narrates how the Catholic Church tries to reconnect with communities by cleaning up the aftermath of calamities, for example, the 2015 mass shooting at Charleston's Emanuel A.M.E. Church, where the faithful try to enhance reconciliation by teaching Christian values of morality and forgiveness. The author also presents the church clean-up exercise, after hurricane Katrina, and Mississippi floods. The author depicts the rapid emergence of other megachurches, different parenting behaviors, where there appear to be more home-schooling systems for children on a matter that are common in contemporary society such as theories concern with the creation and gay Christians. Writer, therefore, presents the rapid social diversity and unpredictable changes such as revolution from the Spanish

language used in church services to a more robust Christian home-schooling system that seems to rival the public education system.

The writer also presents a different picture from the customarily perceived notion indicating that all southern Christians are Christian whites and are conservative especially on political matters since the analysis involves the ideologies, practices, and outlook among current Southern Christians. According to Writer, Christianity is America's dominant faith. However, a predominant difference grapples the South, regarding practices meant to provide meaning, purpose, and identity. The region has many megachurches than other American areas, for instance, this south region has five times the number of churches in the Northeastern region. All these churches are fully utilized and house multi-denominational practitioners who are highly involved with their congregations.

Different churches exist within the same setting, for instance, "the church of God, Church of Christ, Southern Baptist Convention, the church of God in Christ and National Baptist Convention" all consist of over forty percent of the Southern population, who are highly involved members. Other than the Baptist churches, others include the Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Holiness, Episcopal and other non-denominational churches common along back streets and roads heading out of town. Contrary, in America, only 16% Catholics and 19% evangelical Lutherans reach such a high level of involvement in Christianity. The writer indicates that religion is not a private practice but a more public practice, noticeable through the manifestation of the number of praying families or individuals in public places such as restaurants and the large billboards along highways publicizing all sort of religious practices. Some of America's Southern cosmopolitan cities with the most significant percentage of practicing Christians include Dallas 78%, Atlanta 76%, Boston 57%, Seattle 52%, and San Francisco at 48%. This statistics, therefore, depicts that the South seems more religious and portrays a stronger Christian base.

Conversely, Writer presents a different perspective depicting lack of commonness of Christian practices in the south. The author shows the diversity of views, levels of dissent, procedures concern with practicing faith, loving others, interpreting sin, and fellowshiping. These Christians may, therefore, join in the hymn of "I want to eat at the welcome table" but when these "Strangers and Friends" join at the "Welcome Table," there is either friendship or unfamiliarity among them depending on lifestyle, practices, and beliefs. Christians in the South maintain a firm worship grip of ancestors and institutions of the past. Human imaginations still intimately connect to military services and sacrifices during the civil war that ended over 150 years ago. Christians in the contemporary South therefore always link current situations and meaning of conflicts to effects of past occurrences such as the legacy of slavery and consider such phenomena honorable.

The author dramatically captures religion in the southern political arena, where legislatures, leaderboards and a large number of citizens consider the south as predominantly religious. However, the writer shows the different Christian practices in the contemporary South, the origin, and contradictions within the cultural and religious setting. Although the modern South remains highly religious, distinct and dominated by Christians, there is a steady change of status, to the diversification of meaning and interpretation of the expression "Christianity."

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