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Religion and Identity in Appalachia and Carpathia

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This paper will examine the creation of an Appalachian blend of religious elements. It will then look at the attempt to replace it by bourgeois, mainstream Protestant Home missionaries, who followed behind the colonial-like capitalists and additionally contributed to the creation of the "hillbilly" stereotype in the late 19th/early 20th century. This pattern was replicated overseas during the coeval "age of imperialism." Even though traditional churches persist, today the "outside" denominations dominate the religious landscape.

Key-words: *Appalachian religion, congregational polity, home missionaries, internal colonization*

Both Appalachia and Carpathia have faced exploitation of their national resources, such as timber, gold, and coal, by outside forces, whether through internal colonialism or by foreign entities. Economic exploitation is often accompanied by strong cultural influences, including religion, the most profoundly significant aspect of cultural. Most scholars of Appalachian religion argue that early white settlers in the southern and central Appalachians developed a nearly unique brand of Protestant Christianity, drawing from at least three distinctive streams.

This paper will examine the creation of that Appalachian blend of religious elements. It will then look at the attempt to replace it by bourgeois, mainstream Protestant Home Missionaries, who followed close on the heels of colonial-like capitalists. These religious agents additionally played a role in the creation of the negative "hillbilly" stereotype in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The paper will conclude by noting two roughly parallel issues in the Carpathian regions of Ukraine and Romania.

John C. Campbell once wrote that Appalachia was "… a land about which, perhaps, more things are known that are not true than of any part of our country."[2]

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[2] John C. Campbell. *The Southern Highlander and His Home*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1921), xxi.

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This is especially true when it comes to the subject of Religion in Appalachia. Indeed, most quality studies in the nascent field of religion in Appalachia are no more than a quarter of a century old, yet despite various lively contemporary inquiries, myth and stereotype pervade the popular imagination. When the subject is brought up to the typical American – even educated, sophisticated ones – their thoughts turn immediately to snake handlers, even though congregations which practice serpent handling represent only an infinitesimally small portion of Appalachian congregations. Those with a little more understanding will add dour fatalistic Primitive Baptists. Both stereotypes reflect extreme negativity and an abject lack of knowledge. This misunderstanding dates back to the late nineteenth century. Even in the mid-20th century famous historian, Arnold J. Toynbee referred to Appalachians as "white barbarians" who had "lost their civilization" and "reverted to witchcraft and illiteracy."[3] The reality is quite different.

Although our post-modernist brothers and sisters rail against "essentialism" and "universals," early white settlers in the southern Appalachian Mountains did develop a distinct form, or forms, of Protestant Christianity with a particular set of characteristic qualities. There existed at least three notable streams: German dissenters, Scots-Irish Presbyterians, and a small, but influential, group of Separate Baptists from New England. The early German and Dutch dissenters came out of the Radical Reformation. Anabaptists and Pietists, such as the Mennonites and Moravians, sought land and religious refuge in the New World, often actively recruited by agents of the Pennsylvania colony. Many landed in Philadelphia near the end of the 17th century and moved west (beyond the dominant Quakers) in search of land. Some continued until they reached the edge of the Allegheny mounts and veered southwest down the Great Valley structure that lies between the older, metamorphic Blue Ridge Mountains and the younger, sedimentary Alleghany or Cumberland Mountains / Plateaus, which, altogether, compromises the region known as Appalachia. The Scots-Irish closely followed and moved deeper into Appalachia, going beyond the German settlers both farther south and also up the many smaller hollows and valleys. The Scots-Irish predominately adhered to Calvinist Presbyterianism and carried on the sacramental revival tradition. The final group of this early, particular admixture of religious groups migrated down from New England in the mid-1700s. The Separate Baptists shifted away from the Calvinism the Particular Baptists, but not by much. Many came down to the Great Valley and through gaps into the Carolina piedmont. However, after the unsuccessful conflict, known as the Regulator movement, a significant proportion retreated into mountain, valley areas.

[3] Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History: Abridgement of Volumes I-VI*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 149.

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In early white Appalachia these three blend into distinct forms of Protestant Christianity, constituting a religious base culture. They each contributed specific practices and doctrines. They include baptism by total immersion, congregational independence, emotional preaching, large outdoor summer meetings, a "low church" worship style, and a tendency to revivalism[4].

Adamant congregational polity led to a strong sense of community and a co-operative spirit. Even contemporary Primitive Baptists will not celebrate their centerpiece Homecoming service unless the congregation is declared to be "at peace." Their Calvinism, or Calvinistic tendencies, place a strong emphasis on Grace. Salvation by Grace, *sola gratia*, defies the notion of human control whether individual or collective. In traditional Appalachian churches, ultimacy remains in the hands of the Divine. Any human claim to ultimate authority or power would be scoffed at[5].

A strong doctrine of Grace informs one of the signature characteristics of Appalachian culture: humility. The foremost living sage of Appalachian Studies, Loyal Jones, tells of the southern mountaineer "joke" that goes "I'd like to buy him for what he's worth, and sell him for what he thinks he's worth". Not so much a joke, this saying amounts to a severe "put down" within the culture. If one does not truly control their destiny, then it behooves them to adopt on attitude of humility.

Right beside Grace in terms of doctrinal importance comes the Holy Spirit. All of the traditional mountain churches, regardless of their doctrine of salvation, place great stock in its presence and efficaciousness. The Holy Spirit is simply divine presence and action in one's daily life. It represents "That where in greater than I". It also re-enforces the logic of humility. It manifests the reality of human dependence. Thus, traditional Appalachian Christianity, nearly ubiquitous at the close of the eighteenth century, recognized the power and authority of God and human kind's dependence, even for the Arminians. They practiced democracy thorough congregational polity and any church structures beyond the individual congregation were strictly voluntary associations.

In their everyday life they mostly engaged in small scale, "subsistence plus" agriculture or artisanal trades. Although they placed a premium on autonomy, they realized that in preindustrial society no room existed for "rugged individualism." They lived the yeoman paradox. The exigencies of life required that to remain autonomous they had to give up a certain amount of their independence to be part of an interdependent community, which, like congregational polity, engenders a co-operative spirit.

[4] See the Elder John Sparks, *The Roots of Appalachian Christianity: The Life and Legacy of Elder Shubal Stearns*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky,2001), xv-xx.

[5] See Loyal Jones, "Mountain Religion: An Overview" in Bill J. Leonard, ed., *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism*, (Knoxville: university Press of Tennessee, 1999), 91-102.

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"Great Awakenings" in American religious history occur in times of significant religious fervor and discontent. Established central denominations lose numerically while previously small movements on the fringe grow. The Second Great Awakening started at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. One issue only dominated the era: free will. It concurrently witnessed the "democratization of religion" in the United States. Baptist and Methodist movements shifted from the edge to the middle. The congregational polity, free will doctrine Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) came into existence. Even the nascent Unitarian denomination preached "moral self-culture". The old Calvinist church of the Puritans began easing towards becoming the liberal Congregationalist denomination. Then, in the 1830s, the Baptists split asunder due to the missionary crisis.

It was a matter of simple logic. If God preordained the ultimate fate of humans, then why have missionaries. Indeed, the nature of "soul winning" bordered on blasphemy. The ultimate question of "Who is in charge here" arose. The traditional answer: God. The modern answer: us individual humans. In Appalachia it led to the creation of two new Baptist denominations: the Free Will Baptists and the Missionary Baptists. However, the conflict loomed even larger. Mission Boards, and the support of missionaries, required large, national denominational organizations, as wells as requisite financial support from congregations. In the mountains, with their tradition of congregational independence, even the more Arminian Free Will and Missionary Baptists balked. Diagnostic of the "old time Baptists" of Appalachia is their small, regional voluntary associations of sister congregations, which exist for mutual support and encouragement. The Appalachian Baptists who resisted the free will schism deigned themselves the true original Baptists, and adopted the name Primitive Baptists[6].

According to some scholars, Primitive Baptists and the many independent Holiness Churches, which share many attributes, represent the core of Appalachian Mountain Religion. While there is no specific characteristic which is universal in every old mountain church nor any one essential characteristic which every congregation must possess, still these churches imbibe broadly from a constellation of beliefs and practices endemic to the region and the time[7]. For decades they remained at peace. But the people, their culture, and religion soon faced their greatest challenge as the modern industrial world "discovered" them and their natural resources late in the nineteenth century. Not only does this episode parallel the Age of Imperialism in time, it also parallels it in process. Just as the agents of colonialism overseas moved in and took possession of large tracts of land, bearing

[6] Howard Dorgan, *Giving Glory to God in Appalachia: Worship Practices of Six Baptist Subdenominations*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 8-44.

[7] The classic example is Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History*, (Urbanna: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

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valuable natural resources as well as the reins of government, so outside industrialists moved into Appalachia. Again, mimicking what happened on other continents, missionaries came hard on the heels of capitalists and colonialists. Indeed, the Internal Colonial Model, articulated by Helen Lewis, exceeds all others in explaining what happened in central and southern Appalachia in the late 19th and early 20th century[8]. As we have an internal mineral colony, so we have Home Missionaries. As the American conquerors in the Philippines brought "the blessing of civilization trust," so the Home Missionaries sought to bring civilization and Christianity to the benighted mountaineers.

Northern timber companies often paved the way. Some touted bringing "law and order" to the highlands. The Hassinger Lumber Company – Lutherans from Pennsylvania – built a Christian Trade School in order to "redeem" the mountaineers. As railroad lines penetrated the mountains in order to remove resources, many inhabitants decried "railroad religion."[9] Eastern Kentucky native, John C.C. Mayo, who bought the mineral rights to tracts of his neighbor's land, bundled and resold them to coal companies, became the region's first millionaire. At his 1914 funeral in a Methodist church he financed, one eulogist compared him to Cecil Rhodes.

Once the first mainline Protestant denomination established "Home Missions" in Appalachia others, in the spirit of competition, followed suit. The missionaries joined the chorus of the capitalists and writers of the local color school in painting a picture of benighted Appalachian Americans in need of religious salvation and industrial jobs. For bourgeois America to exploit the natural resources of Appalachia, they needed to "otherize" the natives prior to plundering them. Home Missionaries aided this process whether be romanticizing or demonizing the mountaineers.

Thus, began the stories of "our contemporary ancestors." What they really attacked was traditional culture. Since most Appalachians tended to keep to their egalitarian, democratic, communal ways, modern, individualistic, acquisitive America deemed them backward. Mainline middle-class Americans churches launched a full scale attack on traditional Calvinist, or near Calvinist, churches, in Appalachia. In fact, many refused to recognize their existence, virtually adding "heathen" to Toynbee's "white barbarian" epithet. A prime example occurs in the forward to Edward O. Guerrant's 1910 *The Galax Gathers: The Gospel among the Highlanders*. In it, W.W. Moore, president of Union Theological School wrote, "As Sir

[8] Helen Matthews Lewis, Linda Johnson, and Donald Askins, eds., *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*, (Boone, N.C.: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978).

[9] See Richard J. Callahan, *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coalfields: Subject to Dust*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). His first chapter offers an excellent overview religion in the Appalachian Mountains.

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Walter Scott by *The Lady of the Lake* and *Rob Roy* made the Highland of Scotland known to the world and turned an endless stream of tourists through those romantic regions, so Dr. Guerrant , by these sketches, has helped to give the world a true knowledge of this vastly greater and wilder Appalachian region with its four millions of untutored and un-Christianized people, and has done more than any living man to turn a saving stream of evangelists and teachers into its remote and needy recesses". Surely the thousands of churches and millions of people in Appalachia would have been surprised to learn that they were "untutored and un-Christianized"[10].

Many mountaineers noted the co-incidence of intrusion by capitalists and missionaries. Both threatened their culture and way of life. Many resented the encroachment of an American culture which was Armenian, acquisitive, and alienating. Small wonder that most recent scholars of religion in Appalachia go out of their way to lament the lasting effect of the Home Mission movement. Unfortunately, the canard launched against Appalachian religion, in particular, and culture, in general, failed to abate. It yet thrives in the popular imagination.

So how might this brief overview of the religious history of Appalachia inform our understanding of the same topic in Carpathia? Two developments in specific movements come to mind. One offers seemingly good news, while the other, if not bad news, certainly contains dark overtones.

The first occurs across the mountains in Ukraine. Recently, Archbishop Bartholomew of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople – the International leader of the Eastern Orthodox churches – granted an autocephalous status to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. It had been under the control of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has aligned itself with the government of Vladimir Putin in a mutually re-enforcing manner similar to its former relationship with the czars. It refuses to recognize Ukrainian independence. In a true imperial manner the Russian Orthodox Church holds itself apart from any ecumenical body. While this development in Ukraine is fraught with complications, it holds much hope for the preservation and persistence of a unique Carpathian culture[11].

On the Romanian side of the Carpathians, one finds a smaller, but more fraught, religious situation. One of Transylvania's unique treasures is its Unitarian Church. It dates back to the Radical Reformation of the late 16th century and represents the origins of modern Unitarianism. It practices a non-trinitarian form of Christianity. It developed within the Hungarian-speaking segment of the population and still conducts its business and its worship services in that language.

[10] W. W. Moore in Edward O. Guerrant, *The Galax Gatherers: The Gospel Among the Highlanders*, (Richmond, Va.: Onward Press, 1910), xi.

[11] Ukraine Orthodox Church granted independence from Russian Church, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46768270.

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Being out of the mainstream, it faced over four hundred years of persecution. Calvinist and Catholic rulers saw them as heretics and desired to suppress them, but the constitution protected their religious freedom. The introduction of authoritarian communist rule brought even greater oppression, yet this small, ethnic church persevered.

When the American Unitarian movement came into existence at the beginning of the 19th century, its theological basis closely matched that of the Transylvania church; however, fissures developed within the non-creedal American movement within a generation. It slowly evolved – or devolved, depending on one's point of view – away from its Unitarian Christian base. A strong humanistic faction appeared in the mid- to late 19th century and dominated through most of the 20th. Even after its merger with the Universalist Church of America in 1961, it continued to shift in the direction of an ultra-progressive socio-political movement. Its connection with its liberal Christian roots remain tenuous at best, although today's association manifests much more spirituality than half a century ago.

After 1989 bonds between the American and Transylvanian churches strengthened and many US congregations created partnerships with their Romanian cousins. While an influx of American support, financial and otherwise, offered benefits, the two institutions possessed little in common other than their history. While the Transylvanian church strongly manifested the communal nature of traditional cultures, the American church epitomized the ultra-individualistic character of modern societies. In this one may recognize parallels between traditional Appalachian Christianity and the more modern evangelical Home Missionaries who came unbidden into the region to save the people they viewed as less advanced.

This American-Transylvanian religious relationship lacks an adequate study and begs for a systematic investigation. This author has witnessed enough anecdotal evidence to make him uneasy, but will not herein burden the reader with a long litany[12]. Allow one recent incident to suffice for the moment.

The American Unitarian Universalist Association ordained openly gay and lesbian ministers and sanctioned same sex weddings before any other denomination. Thus, when the Synod of the Transylvanian church voted not to authorize same sex marriage in 2017, Americans reacted quickly. National leadership sent a "letter of concern" and essentially expressed the desire for the European churches to catch up to a more enlightened position[13]. Closer to home a member of the Atlanta ministers' cluster wondered in an email if the local

[12] The author was ordained to ministry in the Unitarian Universalist church October 10, 1999 and retired from active parish ministry June 30, 2013.

[13] See Elaine McArdle in the *UU World*, Spring 2018, www.uuworld.org/articles/hungarian-unitarian-marriage-vote.

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congregations should sever their partner church ties in protest. I replied that any discussions of the topic should include the words "cultural imperialism," even though I personally endorse same sex marriage. This represents but one example of the larger, richer, more modernist American church attempting to foist its values on the more traditional church in Romania. It evokes the relationship of mainline Home Missionaries with the more traditional Christian churches in Appalachia.

Those late 19th/early 20th century missions came on the heels of timber and coal companies seeking to extract wealth from the region regardless of how that would affect the lives of the inhabitants and their environment. Today in Transylvania we see a Canadian mining company working to extract gold while wreaking environmental havoc, and logging operations, both foreign and domestic, scalping Carpathian Mountains, often in collusion with corrupt officials. These situations painfully remind one of the ecological and cultural devastation wrought upon Appalachians both past and present.

While one ought never to choose nationalism or isolationism, the dangers of economic colonialism, whether internal or external, must be guarded against. The ecological and cultural richness of Appalachia and Carpathia represent gifts to the world. May we protect and nurture our treasures.

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