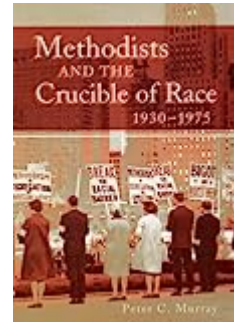


Peter C. Murray. *Methodists and the Crucible of Race, 1930-1975*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004. xix + 266 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1514-7.



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Voluntarism and the Integration of the Methodist Church

As historians seek different ways of analyzing the black freedom struggle, denominational studies have uncovered how Protestant churches with predominantly or exclusively white congregants evolved in church polity, fellowship, and even theology during the mid-twentieth century. Peter Murray contributes to the conversation with his study of what is today known as the United Methodist Church. As the son of a Methodist minister, this project resonated with the author in a personal way. With many others of like faith and background, he plaintively asks, “How could southern white Americans reconcile this vast scheme of state-sponsored discrimination and hate with their professed religion?” (p. 2).

In 1939, the Methodist Church was formed when the schism from the Civil War era was finally healed, uniting the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The new denomination counted over seven million members, including over three hundred thousand African Americans. (Within Methodism, of course, most African Americans belonged to the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, or the Colored [later,

Christian] Methodist Episcopal Church.) After decades of wrangling over how to include African Americans in a church with white southerners, the reunion was realized when a settlement was reached to create a separate jurisdiction for African Americans, the Central Jurisdiction. The other five jurisdictions were determined by geography. Thus, the Methodists created what Murray calls a “Jim Crow church” (p. 52).

As the book title suggests, Murray finds that the “issue of race acted as a crucible in the Methodist Church; the changes that occurred were dramatic and propelled the church in directions not initially envisioned by the participants” (p. 5). The bulk of his text examines how governing bodies within the Methodist Church struggled to maintain unity and brotherhood amid the turmoil of the civil rights movement. By the mid-1950s, African-American clergymen had become more assertive in their efforts to create a color-blind church and to eradicate both the principles behind and the presence of the Central Jurisdiction. While they enjoyed active support from a few of their white counterparts, most of whom were broadly sympathetic to their aims, white leaders gen-

erally allowed voluntarism, defined by Murray as “desegregation that occurred by consensus,” to determine the pace of change (pp. 113-114). This voluntarism was interpreted by some as a necessary strategy to preserve peace and by others as a tactic to stall progressive racial reform. It was utilized in order to placate southern whites who were increasingly disgruntled by the clamor of the civil rights movement and their denomination’s acknowledgment of the legitimacy of many cultural and social grievances. In the final chapter, Murray concludes that voluntarism was closely related to conceptions of American freedom that were carefully contrasted with prevailing notions of totalitarian communism. “Voluntarism,” he writes, “wrapped the church’s means of desegregation neatly in the flag and made advocates of faster action seem like radicals who not only threatened church unity, but also violated an American principle” (p. 235).

In the author’s estimation, voluntarism as a strategy for integration grew out of two myths. The “Great Myth,” as Murray calls it, suggested that African Americans were generally treated well, that communication across racial lines was clear, and that existing institutions could resolve any racial disputes. The second, or “Southern,” myth was prevalent in the most conservative circles. It asserted that segregation was Christian and even natural and that changes in race relations might occur with negotiations between the existing white power structure and moderate African-American leaders, but not through outside coercion (p. 79). Methodists wrestled with both of these myths as they sought to integrate their denomination and later to lend benevolent support to programs that would primarily aid African Americans. Through a process that involved several levels of Methodist governance, annual conferences and jurisdictions could be integrated when two-thirds of their respective members approved. As one might suspect, parts of the Deep South were slow to comply. Annual conferences in Mississippi did not complete their mergers until 1975 (p. 229).

Clergymen with positions of leadership within the denominational hierarchy are the primary focus of this work, but a significant underlying theme suggests that Methodist women and youth were more progressive in their perspectives on race than were other elements in the church. In 1952, the Women’s Division of Christian Service adopted a racial charter that included a commitment to maintain equal employment opportunities, to provide equal accommodations at their meetings, and to work for legislative changes in the political arenas of their home states. By 1960, all six jurisdictional confer-

ences had adopted the charter. Likewise, a national conference of Methodist youth in 1955 ratified a declaration that stated in part, “We feel that the tragic fact of segregation is a serious detriment to the witness of the world Christian community” (p. 74). Murray uncovers how these elements of the Methodist Church were advocates for change long before most of the denomination’s white men were prepared to countenance substantive reforms.

Sources for this book include a host of manuscript collections from clergymen, as well as a number of Methodist periodicals and conference journals. Murray relies heavily at times on the General Conference *Journal*, and therefore, much of the book details the activities of committee meetings and conference proceedings. Before his introduction, he assists the reader by including a brief overview of the various branches within Methodism and a description of the denomination’s governing structure. Even with this aid, readers may become confused over the activities and roles of various commissions, such as the Commission of Seventy, Commission of Thirty-Six, and Commission of Twenty-Four. Nonetheless, Murray does an admirable job of guiding the reader through these labyrinthine details of church governance.

He also relates the Methodists to other denominations by way of references to secondary works that examine Presbyterians and Episcopalians, for example. Missing from his bibliography, however, is Mark Newman’s *Getting Right with God* and any of the articles that preceded this publication. Consequently, there is little mention of the ubiquitous Southern Baptist Convention or analysis of its similarities or differences with the Methodists. While the Methodists might have more liturgical connections to the denominations Murray does mention, the cultural associations with the SBC are worthy of consideration.

Another puzzling omission from the bibliography is Donald Collins’s autobiographical *When the Church Bell Rang Racist* because it focuses exclusively on a Methodist conference in the Deep South. This oversight raises a few questions. For example, Collins’s reference to Methodist Churches that broke away from the national denomination to join the Southern Methodist Church seems to contradict, or at least qualify, Murray’s conclusion that integration occurred “without a mass exodus of members or a new schism” (p. 233). While the SMC was founded to protest the 1939 merger and included a small fraction of the members from the main denomination, it nevertheless represented an alternative institution that some Methodists chose rather than having to endure in-

tegration. Collins also discusses the informal integration in 1966 of two Methodist churches in Mobile, Alabama. Thus, his book includes important material that warranted at least brief mention by Murray.[2]

These omissions aside, Murray does give the reader good insights into the processes by which the Methodist Church hierarchy dealt with racial issues. In addition to its place alongside other denominational studies, his work also fits into recent efforts that examine the relationships between conservative whites and the civil rights movement. By interspersing national headlines pertaining to race and civil rights into his narrative, he gives the reader an appreciation for the ways that events outside of the Methodist Church could have a direct bearing on ecclesiastical matters. Some of these items were a bit distracting (Jackie Robinson and baseball), but on the whole, this approach invites the reader to appreciate how Methodist Church activities occurred in the context of broader social changes. Indeed, Murray laments the fact that the church followed society rather than providing

leadership in racial reconciliation. Outside of its assessment of voluntarism, the book contributes little by way of new perspectives on conservative whites and race, but it does provide important perspective on one of the largest Protestant denominations in the world.

Notes

[1]. Joel Alvis Jr., *Religion and Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994); Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000); and Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2001).

[2]. Donald E. Collins, *When the Church Bell Rang Racist: The Methodist Church and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), pp. 86, 119-123.

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