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Allen Cabaniss
University of Mississippi

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FOLK-CATHOLICISM IN MISSISSIPPI

by Allen Cabaniss

Occasionally there have been critics of William Faulkner's works who have stated or intimated that the writer often contrasted Protestant Mississippi with Catholic (i. e., Roman) Louisiana. I do not intend to enter the realm of literary criticism, but I do propose to question the identification of Mississippi as Protestant. No doubt Mississippians are numerically Baptist first, then Methodist, and only fourthly, fifthly, or sixthly Roman Catholic. But an adjectival description is not necessarily a substantive one. And it is to that point that I direct attention.

Most of what I shall have to say is derived from personal observation and is not otherwise easily documented. I have been a resident of Faulkner's Mississippi for thirty years. The seven years preceding my entry into the state were spent in school in Memphis, Tennessee,—virtually Mississippi!—and Louisville, Kentucky; and the earlier sixteen years, just twenty-five miles from the Mississippi border in northwest Alabama (originally a part of the old Mississippi Territory). For practical purposes, therefore, I can speak from a half-century of intimate association with Faulkner's land and people.

I shall begin with a minor indication of non-Protestantism in the state. Among the vast masses of Mississippians, both white and colored, the pronunciations of the Biblical names of the prophets Hosea and Zechariah, of the patriarchs Noah and Methusaleh (as they are spelled in the Protestant Authorized Version) were and still are, if one listens carefully, "Hosey," "Zachariah," "Noey," and "Methusalum." I have heard quite literate, perfectly intelligent, even educated persons thus mispronounce (?) those names. They could spell them correctly, but they were making use unquestioningly of pronunciations which they had perhaps heard from their

grandparents or other elders. Although I have never known anyone bearing the last name, the other three occur fairly often. Five years ago there were three workmen on the University of Mississippi campus named *Hosea*, but they were known as *Hosey*. A state legislator of recent years carried the name of the second prophet referred to, but this was always abbreviated as "Zack." And at present there is a circuit judge with the name of Noah, but he has a completely irrelevant nickname.

One cannot avoid wondering about the ultimate source of the foregoing mispronunciations. It seems to me possible, even probable, that we may detect here a survival of pre-Reformation language. For we have only to look at the Latin Vulgate, wherein we discover the names spelled thus: Osee, Zacharias, Noe, and Mathusalam (accusative case). They are pronounced very much as indicated above. These spellings were perpetuated in the Rheims-Douay (Roman Catholic) English version of 1582 and 1610. But it is highly unlikely that Protestants, with their former devotion to the "King (or, Saint!) James" Bible would adopt pronunciations from the Douay. It is therefore conceivable, although difficult of positive proof, that in the preceding pronunciations we have a continuation of Catholic tradition among inveterate Protestants.

In 1935 in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, there was a faint, lingering trace of an older past in the case of a few Baptists who addressed clergymen of another faith as "your Reverence." (Their own cleric was inevitably "Brother.") I remember in particular one woman, not past middle age at the time, who always quite seriously spoke to me in that manner. I once asked her why she did so, but she had no real answer. "It's just habit, I guess," was her reply. But one can hardly resist the hypothesis that an Irish Catholic strain must have preserved the curious terminology.

Still further, in Columbia, Mississippi, in 1939, when men yet wore hats, it was quite customary for Protestant men, even Baptist men, to tip their hats to any minister, especially to the pastor of a local church. In this case the practice had probably filtered upward from New Orleans, which was only ninety miles to the south. Even so, a recipient of the courtesy always felt rather strange under such circumstances.

There are two other usages which were undoubtedly the result of New Orleans influence. In Hazlehurst one day in late October, 1935, a parishioner told me that a Baptist kinsman who worked in Louisiana was coming home "for the holiday." In my naïveté I countered, "But Thanksgiving is still a long way off."

"Oh, no," exclaimed my parishioner, "I meant All Saints' Day." I confess to complete surprise: I had no idea that these people had ever heard of such a festival. I discovered, however, that November 1 was indeed a legal holiday in Louisiana, although not in Mississippi. But a hundred and fifty miles north of New Orleans on the Illinois Central Railroad, it had something of a festive atmosphere because of the visit of natives whose jobs were in the big city.

Later in Columbia on All Saints' Day of 1939, and for many years thereafter, I noticed the beautifully adorned city cemetery. It became a special habit of mine always to walk by it to enjoy the banked masses of brown, yellow, white, and golden chrysanthemums (relieved here and there with long green leaves) covering each grave. I have seen similarly bedecked cemeteries in New Orleans. The Columbia practice was obviously derived from "the City" (Marion County vocabulary). It is worth noting that the custom actually has reference to All Souls' Day (November 2), but the flowers are placed as usual a day or so ahead of that date.

Another Columbia incident comes to mind. For a number of years, as in so many communities, a city-wide contest is held for the best decorated house at Christmastime, with prizes to be given by the Chamber of Commerce. Ten years ago (and I have a newspaper clipping as evidence) first prize was won by a Baptist deacon. In a large, beautiful picture-window of his home he had arranged a table with a huge many-tiered cake bearing innumerable candles (electric, of course) and over it a semi-circle of neon lights spelling "Happy Birthday, Jesus!" Only a Sicilian Roman Catholic (read, for example, the saccharine prayers for the Stations of the Cross) and a Mississippi Protestant could be on such familiar terms with the Lord. The award was moreover as much a comment on the mentality of the entire town as on that of the winner.

From very early childhood I can recall my paternal grandparents (one a Cumberland Presbyterian, the other a Baptist) referring to "Old Christmas" (January 6) as a period of minor gift-giving of apples, oranges, and nuts. But more important to them was the necessity (or superstition) of clearing the house of all Christmas ornamentation on the eve of that day and in particular of burning the holly in the open fireplace. Modernity and secularity have made the removal date December 31 or earlier, but the older practice was probably grounded in long-forgotten religious (Catholic?) custom.

From the foregoing illustrations (which could be multiplied) I would hazard this assertion: Although by accident of history Mississippi is predominantly Protestant, its people are unwittingly or subconsciously Catholic. As a matter of fact, Faulkner himself apparently recognized that as a notable phrase in "An Odor of Verbena" suggests, "mist-born Protestantism grafted onto this land of violent sun, of violent alternation from snow to heat-stroke . . ."