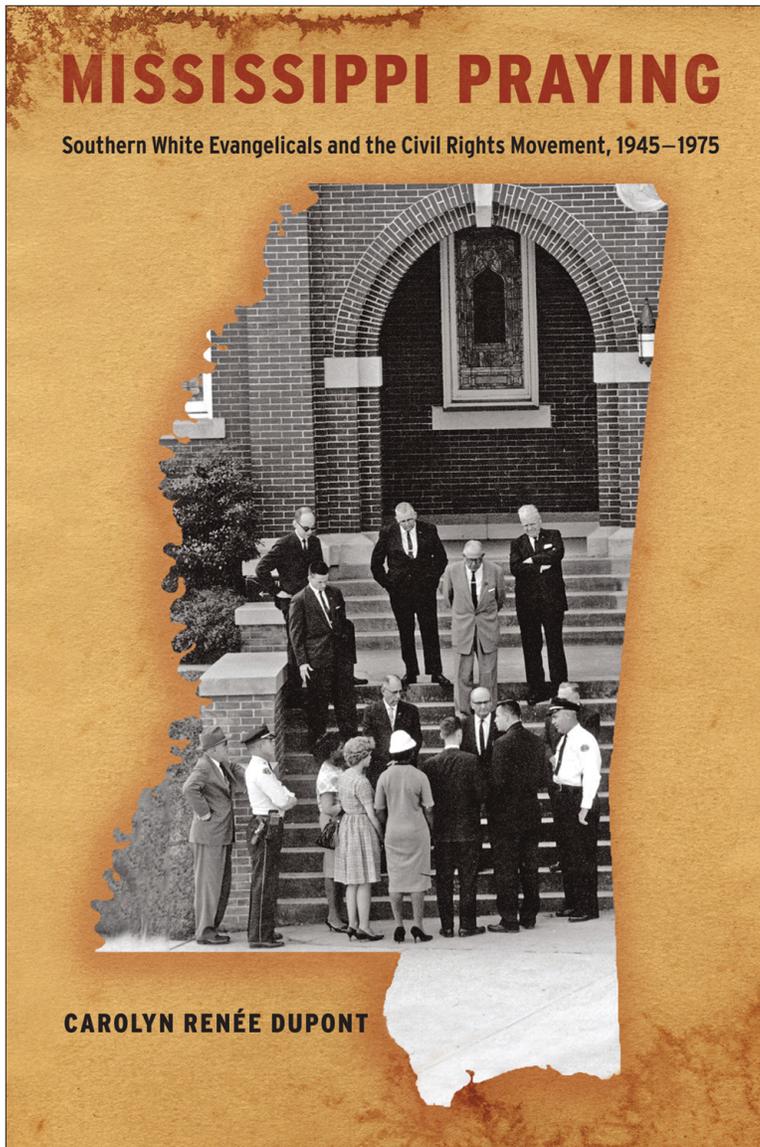


# MISSISSIPPI PRAYING

## INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



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*Mississippi Praying* examines the faith communities at ground-zero of the racial revolution that rocked America. This religious history of white Mississippians in the civil rights era shows how Mississippians' intense religious commitments played critical, rather than incidental, roles in their response to the movement for black equality.

During the civil rights movement and since, it has perplexed many Americans that unabashedly Christian Mississippi could also unapologetically oppress its black population. Yet, as Carolyn Renée Dupont richly details, white southerners' evangelical religion gave them no conceptual tools for understanding segregation as a moral evil, and many believed that God had ordained the racial hierarchy.

Challenging previous scholarship that depicts southern religious support for segregation as weak, Dupont shows how people of faith in Mississippi rejected the religious argument for black equality and actively supported the effort to thwart the civil rights movement. At the same time, faith motivated a small number of white Mississippians to challenge the methods and tactics of do-or-die segregationists. Racial turmoil profoundly destabilized Mississippi's religious communities and turned them into battlegrounds over the issue of black equality. Though Mississippi's evangelicals lost the battle to preserve segregation, they won important struggles to preserve the theology that had sustained the racial hierarchy. Ultimately, this history sheds light on the eventual rise of the religious right by elaborating the connections between the pre- and post-civil rights South.

## History, White Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement (pages 1-14)

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### SUMMARY

*Mississippi Praying* argues that white evangelicals fought mightily against the quest for black equality, with their faith fueling this resistance. Few accounts—popular or scholarly—explore this dimension of the civil rights struggle. This book argues that the individualistic theology of evangelicalism thrived in the South because it suited white supremacy so well. It also documents how America’s white Christians embraced dramatically different beliefs about the morality of segregation; thus the civil rights movement set off a battle for the soul of American Christianity. Grasping these religious dimensions of the struggle alters our understanding of the black freedom struggle, the ways it has succeeded, and the ways it has altered our national religious landscape.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- The role of religion in shaping whites’ responses to the civil rights struggle
- The corporate nature of religious practice and belief
- The systemic, rather than personal, nature of “racism”
- How conservative theology helped segregation to thrive
- How the civil rights movement divided white people of faith
- How the civil rights struggle altered American religio-political configurations

## “Segregation and the Religious World of White Mississippians” (pages 15-38)

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### SUMMARY

Conservative Protestant evangelicalism enjoyed pervasive cultural authority in mid-twentieth century Mississippi. Yet at the same time, white Mississippians demonstrated their zeal for racial segregation by vigorously and often violently resisting black citizens’ demands for full humanity and equality. Chapter one explains this apparent paradox by closely examining both the religion of white Mississippians and the nature of segregation. White Mississippians were not hypocrites but rather practitioners of a faith “divinely suited to white supremacy;” their religion construed morality in entirely individualistic terms, while the segregation they practiced relied on corporate forces to perpetuate it.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The author begins by suggesting that religion is not really a private affair as we so often believe. She also suggests that America’s racial problems have not stemmed from “racism.” How does she ask us to re-conceptualize these two ideas, and why does it matter for understanding the paradoxical relationship between white evangelicalism and white supremacy?
- Describe the kind of white evangelicalism that dominated among white Mississippians. What was its theology and how was this theology maintained? How varied was this religion among the different denominations and classes? What were its practices and activities?
- What kind of relationship existed between religion and southern culture? Between religion and the state government of Mississippi?
- The author borrows the words of Grace Elizabeth Hale to describe segregation as a “grand drama.” What does she mean by this? How did religion contribute to the creation and maintenance of this “grand drama” in Mississippi?

## “Conversations about Race in the Post-War World” (pages 39-62)

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### SUMMARY

American religion changed dramatically in the post-World War II decades. Attendance skyrocketed as Americans joined churches in droves. This new spiritual growth and zeal altered the character of the major southern denominations, making them more part of national religious communities than regional ones. Thus, Mississippi evangelicals participated in large religious networks that exchanged ideas throughout the country. A critique of American race relations was among these ideas. Motivated by faith, men and women who worked at theological seminaries, in denominational offices, and on the mission field challenged many aspects of the racial hierarchy. However, this critique seldom extended to the system of segregation itself. Mississippians heard and some occasionally even echoed this critique, but others fought against it and against the theological assumptions that underpinned it.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Explain the concrete ways that changes in the post-World War II era diluted “southern” churches’ identification with their region.
- What specific global circumstances encouraged the critique of race relations?
- Which groups in each tradition pressed this critique most vigorously? What theology underpinned it? How did they spread it? What were the limits of this critique?
- How did Mississippians in the immediate post-war period deal with the critique of race relations coming from their denominational bodies?

## “Responding to *Brown*: The Recalcitrant Parish” (pages 63-78)

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### SUMMARY

Leading representative bodies of the South’s three most numerically significant religious traditions (Southern Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians) embraced the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision shortly after the Supreme Court announced it in 1954. Yet, the Mississippi representatives of these denominations overwhelmingly rejected both the decision and their leaders’ endorsement of it.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Describe the form and content of the national religious bodies’ endorsement of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.
- Explain how Mississippi evangelicals reacted to their denominations. How did they talk about the difference between them and their denominational leaders? What kinds of activities did they pursue to show their resistance?
- Explain some of the specific ways white Mississippi evangelicals punished ministers who supported racial equality.

**SUMMARY**

As long as segregation had remained unthreatened, Southerners seldom needed to defend it. However, once the denominations announced their support for the Brown decision, religion appeared a grave challenge to southern race relations and a vigorous religious defense of segregation arose. These polemics expounded biblical texts, but they also often brought in political or social elements as well. Such defenses surged anew whenever a religious critique appeared, such as when northern ministers came to speak at Mississippi's colleges and universities. The Citizens' Councils, a group devoted to preserving segregation, used ministers to make its case whenever possible and deployed the religious defense in its publications. Even the state of Mississippi got involved in the religious defense by giving legal support to churches who wanted to separate from their parent denominations over differences regarding integration.

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- What is "segregationist folk theology"?
- What were some aspects of this theology, other than the articulation of the Biblical case for segregation?
- When was segregationist folk theology most likely to appear in Mississippi's public discourse? Explain one of these incidents.
- How did the Citizens' Councils use religion in their defense of segregation?
- In what ways did the state of Mississippi give aid to the religious defense of segregation? How much popular support did this measure have?

## “Ask for the Old Paths”: Mississippi’s Southern Baptists and Segregation (pages 105-126)

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### SUMMARY

While most of Mississippi’s Southern Baptists hoped to keep segregation, the leaders of this community struggled to keep discussion of race out of its public venues of expression. However, a serious rift developed between Mississippi’s Baptists and their leaders at denominational headquarters. This conflict displayed itself vividly as Mississippi Baptists objected to racially progressive material in Sunday school lessons or other publications, to pronouncements of denominational leaders, and to the work of denominational agencies. Some even withheld funds from certain branches of denominational work.

Mississippi’s most prominent Southern Baptist pastor, Reverend Douglas Hudgins, also rarely spoke about race from the pulpit. However, he made known his sympathy for segregation by offering spiritual nurture to the political leaders who protected it. As a part of his vision of “Christian America,” he preached a political philosophy that delegitimized black activism.

Finally, Mississippi Baptists initiated a religious and educational outreach to black Mississippians, and they touted this program as evidence of their racial goodwill. However, the program operated within the dictates of segregation and even reinforced the racial hierarchy’s basic premises.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- As the chapter notes, Mississippi’s Southern Baptists tried to keep discussion of segregation out of its public venues. Why did they do this? In what ways did their commitments to segregation reveal themselves?
- Explain how a pastor of a large and influential church, like First Baptist of Jackson, could give support to segregation, even though he almost never spoke about segregation from the pulpit.
- Explain why the Department of Negro Work was not necessarily a measure of Mississippi Baptists “interracial goodwill.”
- Why does W.P. Davis present a contradictory figure? What are ways of explaining or understanding these contradictions?

## “Born to Conviction”: The Travails of Mississippi Methodism (pages 127-153)

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### SUMMARY

Unlike Baptists, Methodists entertained discussions about race rather forthrightly in their publications and pulpits. Methodists in Mississippi largely preferred segregation, but they displayed significant fault lines over theology and denominational loyalty. Those with the most conservative theologies often defended segregation and criticized the national church, while moderates adjusted their commitments to segregation over time.

When a riot broke out at the University of Mississippi over the admission of a black student in 1962, Mississippians of all faiths reacted. A crisis ensued in the state’s faith communities and did not abate for over two years. Some evangelicals condemned the riots along with the defense of segregation, while others praised the behavior of Governor Ross Barnett in defying the federal government.

Twenty-eight young Methodist ministers responded to the Meredith crisis by issuing a mild statement that urged acceptance of the notion “that all men are brothers.” Yet, their congregations dismissed three of them from the pulpit immediately, and others took new pastorates within months. The actions of the twenty-eight became a new center of conflict around which Mississippians of all faiths expressed their commitments to preserving race relations as they had been for decades.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Over what specific issues did fault lines among Mississippi Methodists express themselves?
- Explain W.B. Selah’s positions on segregation and describe how and why this position changed over time.
- How did the Meredith crisis force the divisions among Mississippi Methodist even wider?

## The Jackson Church Visits: “A Good Quarter-Time Church with a Bird Dog and Shotgun” (pages 155-180)

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### SUMMARY

America’s racial crisis reached its peak in 1964, and events in Mississippi figured importantly in this turmoil. Though the disappearance in Mississippi of civil rights workers and the bombing of African American churches garnered the bulk of national press attention, a parallel crisis over race raged in white faith communities. Black activists and their white allies began visiting white worship services to dramatize the complicity of white religion in segregation. For over ten months they continued these weekly visits, only to experience systematic rejection outside most sanctuary doors. This ordeal culminated when the state’s largest Methodist church rejected two of its own bishops, because one of them was black.

The trauma in Mississippi churches elicited more purposeful action from national religious leaders, who spoke out more forcefully for racial equality. However, these national bodies often softened their critique for the benefit of—and at the urging of—their southern constituencies.

In the summer of 1964, as civil rights workers flooded the state and African American churches erupted in flames, Mississippi’s Southern Baptists recommended the same remedy for the state’s racial woes as it had advocated all along. Mississippi did not need changes in racial arrangements, they argued, but rather more preaching of the same Gospel that had underpinned segregation all along.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why did black activists decide to take their campaign to the white churches? How did the church visit campaigns impact the white congregations that were targeted?
- How did the church visit campaign impact the relationship between white Mississippi congregations and their denominational leaders? How did the campaign shape denominational policy on civil rights activity?
- Why did Mississippi’s Southern Baptists continue to recommend individual salvation as the solution to the state’s racial troubles, even as the state suffered so dramatically from racial strife? What justifications did they give for these arguments? What purpose might these arguments have served?

## “Warped and Distorted Reflections”: Mississippi and the North (pages 181-198)

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### SUMMARY

In 1964, scores of white northern ministers journeyed to Mississippi destinations to give the civil rights struggle a religious sanction. They stood in picket lines, worked voter registration drives, and gave a range of support to black activists. They hoped to prick the Christian consciences of their southern coreligionists and to convince them of the immorality of segregation.

Yet contrary to the hopes of these northern ministers, they met a firm rejection from Mississippi’s white evangelicals, who argued that the northerners were theological apostates who followed a false gospel. Some of these white Mississippi evangelicals even travelled to Illinois to explain why their religion did not require them end to segregation, and received a somewhat sympathetic hearing.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What does the story about Canton’s First Presbyterian Church demonstrate about the relationship between white Mississippians’ faith and white supremacy?
- How do the activities of Hattiesburg’s Presbyterians demonstrate the link between conservative theology and white supremacy?
- How do the events of Hattiesburg’s Presbyterians’ trip to Illinois undermine the myth of a North committed to racial equality?

## Race and the Restructuring of American Religion (pages 199-230)

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### SUMMARY

The three national religious bodies addressed in this study—Southern Baptists, Methodists and Southern Presbyterians, changed dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s. Theological conservatives expunged their more moderate coreligionists from positions of power in the SBC, Methodists lost members in droves, and Southern Presbyterians both splintered and reorganized. These changes all had roots in the racial crisis of the 1960s and the southern religious reaction to it. A conservative theology that limited the meaning of the Christian Gospel to personal salvation had underpinned segregation; now conservative leaders sought to reign in advocates of a more liberal faith that sought social action.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How did Mississippi Baptists react to the racial crisis in northern cities? To the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.? To the SBC's "Statement on the Crisis in the Nation"?
- How did the racial crisis exacerbate the theological fault lines among Mississippi Presbyterians? How did Mississippi's Presbyterian churches and leaders work against civil rights initiatives?
- What changes did the racial crisis bring to the Methodist Church in Mississippi? How did white Methodists in the state react to the process of merger with black Methodists?
- Why does the author describe these dramatic changes in religious bodies as "struggles to define the meaning of Christianity"?

## A Theology on the Wrong Side of History (pages 231-239)

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### SUMMARY

*Mississippi Praying* argues that blacks received almost no help from the faith of southern whites. Rather, this faith actually fueled the resistance that thwarted the freedom struggle at every turn. Moral suasion worked few conversions in the hearts of white Mississippians. Rather raw exertion of power—in the form of federal legislation, court decisions, and economic consequences—brought the changes that came to Mississippi.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Why do you think religion proved so ineffective in convincing white Mississippians that segregation was a moral evil?
- How has white religion in Mississippi changed? In what ways has it remained the same?
- Religion can be a great force for moral good and it often helps people find meaning in life. After reading *Mississippi Praying*, what insights have you gained into other roles religion plays in a society?
- How has this book changed your perception of America's racial past? How has it changed your understanding of the civil rights movement—its goals, its methods, the reasons for its successes and failures?