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The cover image is by Seth Eastman, Distant View of Fort Snelling, 1847-49. Watercolor. Reproduced by permission of the Minnesota Historical Society.

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IN REVIEW

GODS OF THE MISSISSIPPI

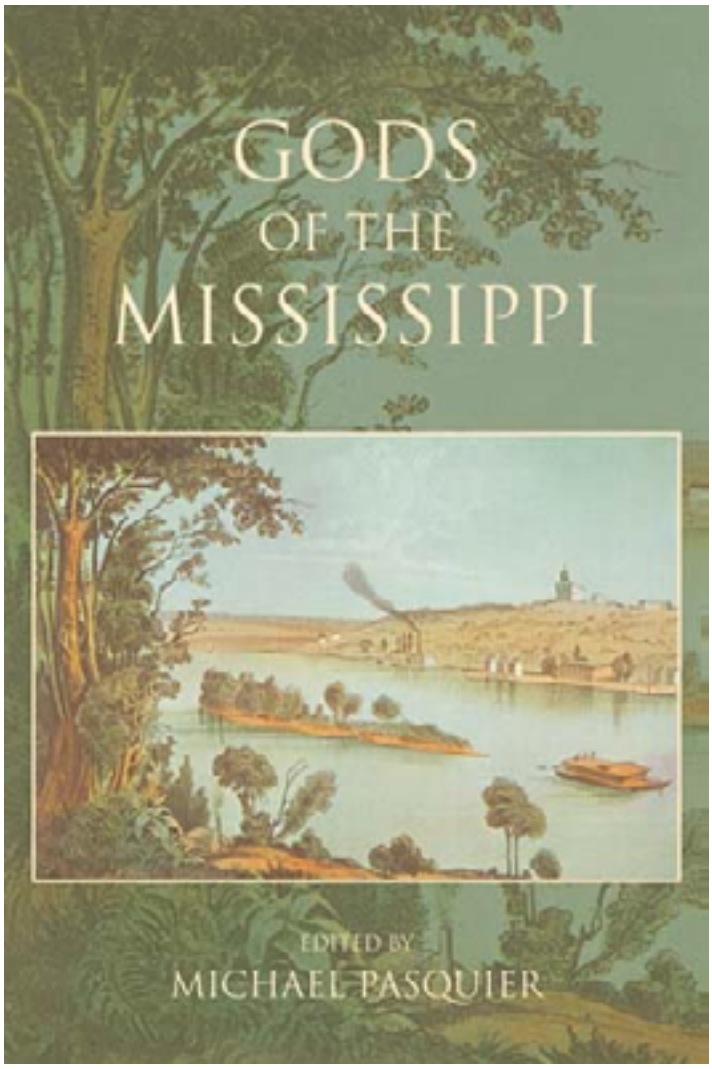
By Christine Croxall

Nearly twenty years ago Thomas Tweed and a host of collaborators, responding to the cultural and historiographic shifts of the era, called for narratives of the United States' religious past that "draw on new motifs and plots and include a wider range of settings and characters" than those available at the time.[1] Michael Pasquier's edited volume, *Gods of the Mississippi*, extends Tweed's project to the Mississippi River, an understudied region in American religious history but familiar habitat for Pasquier, who wrote his first book on French missionary priests in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys in the nineteenth century, and now researches and teaches about the intersection of religious practice and the environment along the Gulf Coast and the Mississippi River Delta.[2]

A large group of African-American spectators stands on the banks of Buffalo Bayou to witness a baptism, circa 1900. Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Organized chronologically, the volume's nine essays span the colonial era through the early twenty-first century, and follow the river from its headwaters in present-day Minnesota to its mouth at the Gulf of Mexico. Following Pasquier's brief introduction, Jon F. Sensbach's thoughtful essay puts the Mississippi River in a larger Atlantic context by foregrounding the enslaved Africans forcibly transported to the region in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They arrived, Sensbach contends, with rich and varied religious beliefs, practices, and rituals from Africa and passed their religious traditions to their descendants, while also adapting to other religious worldviews they encountered and creating new religious forms that left an "indelible African imprint" on the region and the nation (19).

The next three essays explore the notion, held by religious leaders and churchgoers alike in the nineteenth century, that the United States was the center of the divine project to complete history, and that the Mississippi River Valley would play a special role in the unfolding of God's plan. Sylvester Johnson considers the alignment between Protestant missions and U.S. imperialism in Indian country. Buoyed by visions of converting American Indians as a prelude to the end times, missionaries sent by the Presbyterian Synod of Georgia and South Carolina and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions set up a series of mission plantations in present-day Mississippi, funded by the government's Civilization Fund and the Indians' own annuities, to harness Chickasaw and Choctaw labor, as Johnson demonstrates, and inculcate Anglo-American, Protestant economic and religious practices. Arthur Remillard traces the meaning-making that accompanied three early-nineteenth-century explorers' efforts to identify the source of the Mississippi River. Zebulon Pike, Giacomo Beltrami, and Henry Rowe Schoolcraft successively claimed to have found the origins of the mighty river in present-day northern Minnesota, each one correcting his predecessor's claims and deploying the findings in larger ideological projects. Promoting ideologies of a different sort, Mormons, Vermont Pilgrims, Millerites, and other adherents to new religious movements in the antebellum era conceived of the Mississippi River valley as the locale for millennial culminations. Though their predictions of the end times failed to materialize, Thomas Ruys Smith attests that their ideas about the river's religious significance spread into the wider culture.



Michael Pasquier, ed., Gods of the Mississippi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. xvi + 224 pp., cloth, $75.00; paper, $27.00)

Two other contributors join Remillard in analyzing the import of space and place in Mississippi River religious communities. Seth Perry demonstrates that Mormons marshaled the location and beauty of Nauvoo, their settlement on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River in Illinois, to promote Mormon identity and Mormon immigration, while their detractors registered dissonance between the loveliness of Nauvoo's location and the suspicious Mormon practices in the town. Justin D. Poché explores how African Americans and French- and German-descended white inhabitants in the parishes lining the river between Baton Rouge and New Orleans from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century used sacrilized spaces—churches, devotional grottos, and cemeteries, but also front porches, the levee, and the river itself—to manage the complexities of environmental and social change, even as the petroleum industry collaborated with civic leaders to sponsor a competing narrative of "a mythic and therapeutic southern past" bolstered by heritage tourism (163).

Essays by John M. Giggie, Alison Collis Greene, and John Hayes explore religiosity in the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta region since the late nineteenth century. According to Giggie, instead of subsisting in the so-called nadir, African American men and women in the three decades after Reconstruction innovated by incorporating fraternal organizations, motifs of train travel, and consumer goods into their spiritual lives in order to negotiate the limitations of Jim Crow segregation in the Delta. Greene contextualizes the emergence and brief success of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, a cross-class, interracial collaboration that grew out of the rural crisis during the Great Depression and generated a fierce backlash from the middle-class establishment. Both Giggie and Greene point out the appeal of the Pentecostal-Holiness movement—with its experiential, improvisational worship style, openness to women's leadership, and theology of personal holiness—among the impoverished inhabitants of the Delta. Musical icon Johnny Cash drew on a different religious heritage from the Arkansas Delta of his youth. Hayes tracks Cash's religious trajectory, from a regionally grounded, oral southern Folk Religion, to an ahistorical, individualistic, culturally dominant Neo-Evangelicalism in the 1970s, and back again. Ironically, the middle-class, educated audience of his later years, who shared little of his cultural heritage, embraced Cash's folk religiosity for its authenticity, candor, and substance.

Targeting an audience of historians and scholars of religion, *Gods of the Mississippi* would be a useful companion to geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, and cultural theorists interested in the intersections of religious practice and geographical environment. Though weighted heavily toward the southern segment of the river, the collection as a whole succeeds at depicting an array of religious expressions and forms circulating along the Mississippi, primarily in the last two centuries, and captures some of the unique demographic diversity of the region. Shifting the orientation from the standard east-west trajectory to a north-south flow, the collection emphasizes movement and heterogeneity in the religious lives of the inhabitants. These are not linear, grand narratives in the making, but situated, "intentionally convoluted stories" capturing how diverse people have made religious meaning along the unpredictable and uncontrollable river (11).

References

[1] Thomas A Tweed, ed., *Retelling US Religious History* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997), 4.

[2] Michael Pasquier, *Fathers on the Frontier: French Missionaries and the Roman Catholic Priesthood in the United States*, 1789-1870 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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About the Author

Christine Alice Croxall recently completed her doctoral degree in history at the University of Delaware. Her current project examines competing Protestant and Catholic efforts to Christianize the Mississippi River Valley between 1780 and 1830. In the 2016-2017 academic year she will be a postdoctoral fellow at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis.