

Religion - Part 4: Religious Trends and Conflicts of the Twentieth Century ^[1]

Religion

by Donald G. Mathews, 2006

See also: [Baptists](#) ^[2]; [Church of England](#) ^[3]; [Episcopal Church](#) ^[4]; [Evolution, Teaching of](#) ^[5]; [Fundamentalism](#) ^[6]; [Great Awakening](#) ^[7]; [Islam](#) ^[8]; [Judaism](#) ^[9]; [Lutheran Church](#) ^[10]; [Methodist Church](#) ^[11]; [Moravians](#) ^[12]; [Pentecostal Holiness Church](#) ^[13]; [Presbyterian Church](#) ^[14]; [Quakers](#) ^[15]; [Reformed Church](#) ^[16]; [Roman Catholic Church](#) ^[17]; [Overview of Religion in NC](#) ^[18] (NC Atlas Revisited)

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Part 4: Religious Trends and Conflicts of the Twentieth Century

Religious life in twentieth-century North Carolina was conflicted on a range of issues created by scientific discovery, U.S. Supreme Court ^[24] decisions, and changes in personal and public life. A key aspect of these conflicts was their roots in evangelical views of authority, personal independence, and revelation. Ultimately, differences in biblical interpretation and the meaning of subjective confirmation of faith—the twin bases of evangelical authority—continued to prevent Christian harmony regarding many issues.

In the 1920s, as high school textbooks began exposing students to explanations of biological evolution through natural selection, some concerned believers tried to prevent this aspect of modern science from being taught; but North Carolina state legislators refused to acquiesce. In the early 1960s, the U.S. Supreme Court forbade prayer in public school assemblies (although the practice persists in defiance of the ban), and this led white conservative Christians to establish private academies—some of which were founded to avoid racial integration of schooling as much as to resist secularism.

Less radical attempts to resist secular trends were continued by Christians fighting to restrict public school students' access to knowledge about birth control devices and frequently to dictate specified lesson plans on sexual behavior even beyond health classes. When the Equal Rights Amendment was introduced to extend constitutional rights to women during the 1970s, a group that included conservative Christians rallied to defeat it as a referendum on feminism. Christian denominations in North Carolina also continue to wrestle with the ordination of women, homosexuality, abortion, capital punishment, and ethnic differences. These issues and others emphasize the continued presence of conservative, moderate, and liberal factions within denominations.

The religious style, cadences, music, and sensibility of the civil rights movement of the 1960s demonstrated the immense power of religion among North Carolinians. But religion, meaning, and obligation—what people held sacred and how they behaved in responding to the holy—was so affected by gender, race, class, and power that it could not meld North Carolinians into a cultural consensus. Sharing the same [Bible](#) ^[25] and believing themselves responsible to the same God—sometimes even singing the same hymns—allowed the religious of both races to make common cause only in rare instances. Yet by the end of the twentieth century, blacks and whites were beginning to share more readily across the racial divide, relying on the religion they shared to struggle toward mutual understanding.

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Authors:

[Macfie, John](#) ^[27]

[Mathews, Donald G.](#) ^[28]

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