



William Louis Poteat: A Leader of the Progressive-Era South (Religion in the South)

Randal Hall

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William Louis Poteat (1856-1938), the son of a conservative Baptist slaveholder, became one of the most outspoken southern liberals during his lifetime. He was a rarity in the South for openly teaching evolution beginning in the 1880s, and during his tenure as president of Wake Forest College (1905-1927) his advocacy of social Christianity stood in stark contrast to the zeal for practical training that swept through the New South's state universities.

Exceptionally frank in his support of evolution, Poteat believed it represented God at work in nature. Despite repeated attacks in the early 1920s, Poteat stood his ground on this issue while a number of other professors at southern colleges were dismissed for teaching evolution. One of the few Baptists who stressed the social duties of Christians, Poteat led numerous campaigns during the Progressive era for reform on such issues as public education, child labor, race relations, and care of the mentally ill. His convictions were grounded in a respect for high culture and learning, a belief in the need for leadership, and a deep-seated faith in God.

Poteat also embodied the struggle with the intellectual compromises that tortured contemporary social critics in the South. Though he took a liberal position on numerous issues, he was a staunch advocate for prohibition and became a strong supporter of eugenics, a position he adopted after following his beliefs in a natural hierarchy and absolute moral order to their ultimate conclusion.

Randal Hall's revisionist biography presents a nuanced portrait of Poteat, shedding new light on southern intellectual life, religious development, higher education, and politics in the region during his lifetime.

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