



International Center of Photography

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media release

Take Me to the Water: Photographs of River Baptisms

On view from
January 21
through
May 8, 2011

Media Preview
January 20, 2011
11:30 am–1:00 pm

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Unidentified Photographer
[River baptism, Pibel, Nebraska], 1913
International Center of Photography

Religious rituals in America are not often public spectacles. A key exception is the tradition of river baptisms that flourished in the South and Midwest between 1880 and 1930. These outdoor communal rites were public displays of faith, practiced by thousands of Protestants, and witnessed by entire communities. A combination of economic depression and industrialization spurred religious fundamentalism in rural areas, and media-savvy preachers promoted mass revivals and encouraged a dialogue about religion in popular culture and media. Photographs of river baptisms often disseminated as postcards, both by worshippers documenting their personal life-affirming experiences and by tourists noting exotic practices and vanishing folk traditions will be on view at the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street) from January 21 to May 8, 2011.

Photographs played an important role in documenting these river baptisms, especially in the early twentieth century. For example, a panorama by the African American photographer James Calvin Patton depicts the popular evangelical preacher Black Billy Sunday baptizing candidates in 1919 as thousands watch in Fall Creek, Indianapolis. While professional photographers were hired by the baptismal candidates, their families, or their congregations to document the proceedings, itinerant and amateur photographers also captured the events on film and often printed them on postcards, which were sent or collected in albums. After the 1893 United States debut of the picture postcard at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, postcard fever swept the nation.

From the late 1890s to the end of the 1920s—the postcard’s golden age—two different types of postcards were produced: real photo postcards and photomechanical postcards. Although river baptisms were pictured in both kinds of postcards, their representations and audiences were mostly different, as evidenced by the text on the back of the postcards that were sent. Real photo postcards usually depict family members or friends, who are identified on the verso. Their compositions, often frontal and symmetrical, usually try to capture as much detail as possible about the location and onlookers; surprisingly, the focus is not always on the baptismal candidates. Stressing the communal and social aspects of the event, these cards present the rite as an important, dignified, and solemn occasion, a traditional and visually stunning ritual in a rapidly changing world.

Mass-produced photomechanical postcards, on the other hand, presented these religious occasions as spectacles performed for outsiders. The tourist who purchased the postcard may have witnessed the baptism, but probably bought the card as a souvenir, a document of a place with customs unlike his own. Many of the mass-produced postcards depicting baptisms of African American Protestants (often titled “Genuine Negro Baptism”) in the South were purchased by vacationing Northerners, who expressed their amazement at these rituals in their racist messages. Often racist, these Southern View images confirmed the stereotypical and often derisive view of the South as an “exotic” and “primitive” place unencumbered by the technological advances of modernity. While Southerners bore the brunt of “otherness,” Midwesterners and Westerners were not immune to Northern scorn. Whether celebratory or ridiculing, real photo postcards and mass-produced postcards documented and preserved a vanishing folk tradition that expressed the faith of rural believers during a time of tremendous change in the U.S.

Take Me to the Water is drawn from a unique archive of vernacular photographs of river baptisms donated to the International Center of Photography in 2007 by collectors Janna Rosenkranz and Jim Linderman. The exhibition is organized by Erin Barnett, ICP Assistant Curator of Collections, and will include vintage real photo postcards, mass-produced postcards, and a panorama. The exhibition is accompanied by a volume *Take Me to the Water*, published by Dust to Digital Press in Atlanta, Georgia; the book, which includes a CD of religious songs, was nominated for a 2009 Grammy Award.

This exhibition was made possible with public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.

