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Role of religion flavors U.S. history text

Historian's new book 'Unto a Good Land' emphasizes faith

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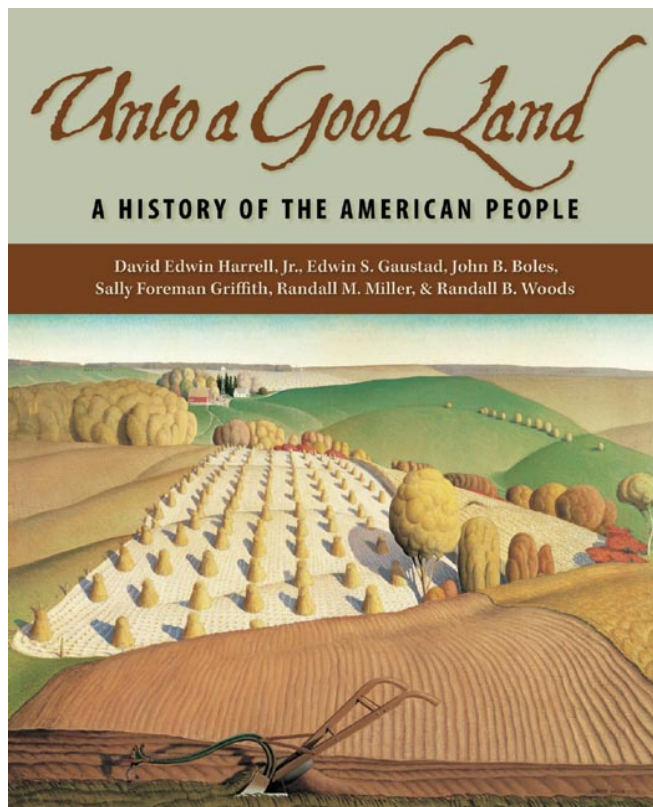
News staff writer

Recently retired Auburn University historian David Edwin Harrell has said for years that American textbooks shortchange the role of religion in the nation's history.

Now Harrell and five other historians have co-written a new U.S. history textbook emphasizing the role of faith.

"You can read American history books and not know people were religious," he said Tuesday to a freshman history class at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. "Religion plays good roles and bad roles. It's there in very prominent places. If you miss it, you miss a lot."

The UAB freshman history class won't be missing out on the role of religion in American history. UAB is among the first schools to adopt Harrell's new history text, "Unto a Good Land: A History of the American People," published by Eerdman's last year.



Margaret Ambrester, assistant professor of history at UAB, adopted the textbook for her class. She agrees that religion has been given inadequate treatment. "It's had an influence on the nation from its earliest days till now," she said.

"This book explains the importance of religion," said Harrison Ashurst, a student who was one of the few to raise her hand when Harrell asked how many people had heard of the faith-healing evangelist Oral Roberts.

From Christopher Columbus to Bill Clinton and George Bush, the textbook delves deep into the role of religion in society. It gives explanations of influential religious leaders such as Roberts, Jerry Falwell, Billy Graham and Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, who was a popular TV personality in the 1950s.

Harrell notes there are some 800,000 churches in America that constitute one of the most influential social networks in the country. "A large portion of the charity dispensed in America is through churches," he said. "What shocks foreigners is how many churches there are in America."

That omnipresent religiosity has affected politics and the economy from the nation's founding. "The nation has a pervasive religious underpinning," he said. "You can't understand our policies without the feed-in from religious ideas."

Harrell, who retired from Auburn last year, and his colleagues have been working on the book for nearly 15 years.

"A lot of textbooks acknowledge that the Puritans were religious, and give a distorted summary of the Scopes trial, and that's about it," Harrell said.

Harrell, who has traveled the world studying religion and written biographies of Pat Robertson and Oral Roberts, will speak at UAB today about how the charismatic movement has spread across the globe.

Harrell will discuss "The Pentecostal Century: The Explosion of Charismatic Religion Around the World" today at 3:30 p.m. in the Henley room of the Sterne Library at UAB.