

### Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870

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#### Recommended Citation

Schweningen, Loren (2011) "Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.2.14

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss2/13>

## Review

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Spring 2011

**Fountain, Daniel L.** *Slavery, Civil War, and Salvation: African American Slaves and Christianity, 1830-1870*. LSU Press, \$36.00 ISBN 978-0-8071-3699-7

### Re-assessing African-American Christianity

The major argument that the author presents in this provocative and interesting study is that the great majority slaves in the southern United States during the late antebellum era did not accept Christ into their lives. This interpretation flies in the face of many traditional studies of slavery, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, when scholars only pronounced that slaves were overwhelmingly devout Christians. The older studies, including those of Eugene Genevose, Albert Raboteau, John Blassingame, Lawrence Levine, and Charles Joiner, among others, suggested Christianity gave African Americans, as Joiner argued, "a source of strength and endurance that enabled them to triumph over the collective tragedy of enslavement." There were a few early studies, mostly centering on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, that suggested a more complex picture, including Mechal Sobel's path-breaking *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith*. To buttress his many points and to defend his thesis, Fountain created a database of 381 individuals drawn from four thousand slave narratives, autobiographies, and interviews of former slaves, most of them coming from the Works Progress Administration [WPA] interviews during the Great Depression. The group of slaves included those who provided direct testimony about either a conversion to Christianity, or a non conversion. The first chapter contains a statistical breakdown concerning the age, occupation, residency, attitudes of owners, independent slave worship, of members of this group. From this data he concludes that only 38 percent of the slaves in the antebellum South were, in fact, Christians during the late antebellum era. In succeeding chapters he discusses how and why such a relatively small percentage of slaves--relative at least to the traditional interpretation--chose not to become Protestants or Catholics: the great size of the

region, sparse populations in many areas, lack of qualified white preachers and ministers, the failures of missionaries, prohibition by owners, the unattractive Christian message for slaves to obey their masters, and fears among the planter class about the message of liberation in the Old Testament. The study also examines the impact and continued importance of African religions beliefs among many slaves in the United States, even during the late antebellum era. These faiths varied, but included elements of ancestor worship, polytheism, and “an active linkage between the living and the dead as well as a merging of the natural and supernatural realms” (69). In this regard, he cites recent works by Allan Austin, Sylviane Diouf, Michael Gomez, and Anthony Pinn, among others. He concludes with the assertion that following the Civil War there was a tidal wave of blacks into the Christian faith and their own churches.

Despite the questionable reliance of the WPA narratives, criticized by some scholars because of the age of the interviewees, most of the blacks involved in the process were young children during the 1850s or born during the Civil War, and the fact that whites did most of the interviewing, and despite the distracting infusion of arguments by other historians throughout the study while in the midst of employing more traditional contemporary sources, the author makes a number of important points which warrant further study, perhaps on a state-by-state, or locale-by-locale basis. Lacking in the study is any examination of blacks who rejected any faith, who were non-believers or non-religious. Given their condition, it could be argued that some slaves would fall in this category. Yet, it is probably true that many historians have over-emphasized Christianity as a major force within the slave population. Even so, this slim volume appears to raise more questions than it answers. Perhaps the author’s comment after discussing whether the use of a Bible in conjure rituals revealed a faith in Christianity, or a perversion of the Gospel, could be made about other points the author advances in this stimulating study: “We shall never truly know” (91).

*Loren Schweninger is Elizabeth Rosenthal Excellence Professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and the author of seven books on African American history, including, most recently, The Southern Debate over Slavery: Volume 2, Petitions to County Courts, 1775-1867 (Illinois Press, 2008).*