

Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform in Northern Black Thought, 1776-1863.

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Recommended Citation

Kerri-Ritchie, Jeffrey R. (2012) "Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform in Northern Black Thought, 1776-1863.," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.1.11

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss1/33>

Review

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Winter 2012

Roberts, Rita *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform in Northern Black Thought, 1776-1863.* Louisiana State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8071-3708-6

Exploring Nineteenth-Century African-American Thought

Dr. Roberts' research question is crystalline: why did so many people of African descent identify strongly with America during a time of "evolving racial ideology and expanding slavery" (2). Her answer is that a "significant and influential population of northern blacks" saw the American Republic and their place in it through the "lens of evangelicalism" (2). This Protestant faith "made the Bible the ultimate religious authority" (5). Consequently, northern blacks drew upon revolutionary republican ideals of freedom and equality as a means to both push for their own civic incorporation as well as to remake a new nation. This argument is pursued through six chapters.

Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform starts with an explanation for the "forging of American identity" through the making of a distinct African identity that collapsed ethnic distinctions together with conversion to Christianity during the eighteenth century (13). Various African ethnicities became organized under organizations with African names and popular cultural activities such as Pinkster and Negro Election Day. Christian converts included Baptists Charles Bowles and Jeremiah Asher, Methodists Richard Allen, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julie Foote, and bible-loving Chloe Spear. One wonders about the extent of Christian conversion as well as institutional affiliation among ordinary black farmers, sailors, laborers, domestics, families, etc. Moreover, to what extent were ethnic identities totally subsumed under common labels? Michael Gomez's work—which Dr. Roberts admires—makes an argument for the prolonged nature of African ethnicities into the antebellum South. Was the same true for northern blacks?

The second chapter examines what it calls “African Americanization” (44) through northern blacks’ subscription to republican ideals during the American War of Independence. Christian converts Paul Cuffee, Lemuel Haynes, James Forten, and Peter Williams found “common ground” with the citizens of the new republic (51). Slaves also appear to have drawn upon these ideals in writing petitions for freedom based upon universal rights as well as soldiering for the Patriot cause. One problem with this argument, however, is that it assumes beliefs when they might alternatively have been strategies for freedom. A more serious reservation is that it ignores the majority of slaves who joined the British cause in pursuit of personal liberty. They did not care for American republican ideals; nor were they attracted to British monarchical control; instead, they were *carpe diem* freedom seekers. Benjamin Quarles offered this interpretation in 1961. Numerous scholars have repeated it, sometimes without proper acknowledgment. Did black contemporaries know about this majority and overlook it in pursuit of their goals? Why does Dr. Roberts not mention it?

Chapters’ three and four examine alternative strategies for reform by the black elite against a backdrop of slavery’s antebellum expansion. This second generation stressed their “Americanness” (103), despite contrasting approaches. Philadelphia’s William Whipper pursued moral reform as the most direct path to citizenship, while New York’s Samuel Cornish, Charles B. Ray, and Philip Bell supported the development of black institutions. Above them all stood David Walker—born free in North Carolina and moving to Boston to become a clothier and activist—whose life and work exemplified a second generation’s evangelical reform efforts. This is the least convincing part of the book for several reasons. There is a large historical literature on northern blacks that makes Dr. Roberts’ account read thinly. Furthermore, the equation of the antebellum black reform movement of free community development, slave abolition, and equal rights (75) with evangelical republicanism seems a trifle reductionist. David Walker’s Christian republicanism seems a little tight for his international black agenda—*Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*—carefully excavated by those of differing ideological persuasions like Herbert Aptheker, Sterling Stuckey, and Peter Hinks.

Moreover, how did the northern black majority receive these reforms or even respond to contrasting strategies by the black elite? One of the most striking things about black reform movements was the frequency of complaints by the black elite about how black northerners paid insufficient attention to temperance, educational uplift, and organizations. The Sherbro of Sierra Leone

say: "You cannot sit alone and be a chief." In addition, the international dimensions of reform are downplayed because of the book's stress on remaking the nation. But racial attacks on black people in Cincinnati, New York City, Philadelphia etc. during the 1830s and 1840s sparked emigration northward to British Canada and the establishment of free black communities in western Ontario together with an influx of black people into urban southern Ontario. After the British abolition of slavery in 1834, African Americans consistently commemorated the emancipation of their West Indies brethren as well as mobilized for the destruction of American slavery through the 1860s. These various activities jostle awkwardly under an evangelical tent.

Chapter 5 examines northern black elite responses to "increased discrimination" and scientific racial ideology buttressing white superiority. Reformers like Sarah Douglass, Hosea Easton, Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass, James McCune Smith etc. attacked the causes of racial discrimination and occasionally provided their own racial theories to counteract the notion of black inferiority. Their responses went "through the lens of evangelicalism" (133). There are some interesting ideas here—black Egypt, millennialism, origins of racism etc.—but again one wonders about the narrowness of the lens as well as the thinness of the treatment compared to existing specialist treatments?

Chapter 6 maintains the belief that America "waned" during the 1850s, but with the outbreak of war, "faith and hope" were renewed as the nation was to be cleansed of slavery to renew its God-given mission (12). This reviewer would have liked more on this important historical moment for several reasons. First, the 1850s was not a good decade for free black Americans' belief in God, let alone America. Not only did stalwarts like Douglass question the meaning of July 4th for black Americans; not only did colonization schemes to West Africa and the Caribbean become more popular; not only did northern blacks physically resist the laws of the land regarding fugitive slaves—but some like the Reverend Samuel R. Ward turned their back on the United States and embraced the British Empire, while others like Ward's cousin Henry H. Garnet (and later Ward too) went off to preach to the first generation of free Afro-Jamaicans. Second, this black elite—much like an earlier generation during the American Revolution—could not have foreseen the nature and outcome of this political conflagration. Indeed, I would argue that it was not until slaves on the farms and plantations of the American South reworked secession into the Great American Slave Rebellion—slave self-emancipation, work slowdowns, soldiering

etc.—that northern Republicans, including the black elite, realized the implications of this titanic struggle and put their gloss on it. Third, the book ends in 1863, and does not extend into the 1860s and 1870s. But surely these two decades, especially the legal incorporation of people of African origin into the American polity, were critical to the process of “African Americanization” were they not?

Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform is written lucidly and draws well from black elites’ writings and the historical literature. It is undeniable that many members of the black elite subscribed to notions of God’s Republic and the need for its earthly realization. But the argument has its limitations because it ignores the northern black majority, skims an impressive historical literature, reduces too many black leaders and organizations to evangelical republicanism, has too little to say about the gender dynamics of reform leadership, and downplays the international dimensions of black life, work, activism, and thought. Perhaps “patriotism” is too narrow a concept to capture the richness, vitality, and struggles of northern free blacks? Finally, the book’s narrative form—traceable to John Hope Franklin’s *From Slavery to Freedom* in 1947 and even John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* of 1678—in which people of African descent struggle slowly but surely toward greater freedom and equality seems less efficacious than the approach of those scholars who argue for contingency, interruption, and promiscuity in the black historical experience.

Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie is an associate professor of history at Howard University. He has Authored Freedpeople in the Tobacco South: Virginia, 1860-1900 (University of North Carolina Press, 1999), and Rites of August First: Emancipation Day in the Black Atlantic World (Louisiana State University Press, 2007). His current projects include Freedom’s Seekers: Essays in Comparative Emancipation, August Address: An Anthology of West Indies Emancipation Day Speeches, and a popular history of emancipation. He may be contracted at: jrkerrritchie@gmail.com