

Julius H. Bailey. *Around the Family Altar: Domesticity in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1865-1900.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005. xii + 151 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2842-2.



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With emancipation, the first order of business for many African Americans was the reconstruction of families. Denied legal marriage, denied authority over their children, separated by sale, brutality, and then war, former slaves searched, migrated, and advertised to reconnect with family members. Historians since have studied the structure of the antebellum black family and its continuities and transformations in the years following the Civil War, and we have shelves of rich studies to show for it.

Sparked by Daniel Patrick Moynihan's controversial report *The Negro Family in America* (1965), much of the literature in sociology and history has centered on the long-term impact of slavery and discrimination on African American families. Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1976) was written in part as a response to Moynihan's contention that the black family was a broken institution. Instead, Gutman found that African Americans, drawing on African practices and facing the hardships of slavery, developed variations on and alternatives to the nineteenth-century, white family model which

served to provide nurture and continuity in slavery and in the decades after. Since then the subject has often involved an answer to one or both of these questions: to what degree has the American experience damaged the African American family; and how different in structure is the historical African American family from the normative nuclear family?

In *Around the Family Altar: Domesticity in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1865-1900*, Julius H. Bailey addresses neither of these questions directly. Rather, he explores the development of a domestic ideology that arose in the African American community, as religious leaders struggled with challenges confronting the black family. In particular, Bailey recounts the ways in which leaders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) adopted and then modified the prescriptive language of domesticity pervasive in white Protestant culture for a black audience. He finds that, despite the very different pressures on the African American family, editors of the denomination's periodicals found much to

use in domestic ideology of the nineteenth-century middle class.

The range of Bailey's source material is limited primarily to the pages of the *Christian Recorder*, but he mines it thoroughly and effectively. In particular, he examines the efforts of four of the paper's editors, Elisha Weaver, Benjamin Tanner, Benjamin Lee, and H. T. Johnson, although the first two figure most prominently. Bailey also brings in other important leaders in the AMEC, Bishops Daniel Payne and Henry McNeal Turner, and activist and writer Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

Weaver headed the paper from 1862 to 1868, and even more than his successors, was willing to adapt the messages of his white counterparts for his own audience. Weaver reprinted and summarized Horace Bushnell's essays on childrearing, family relations, and conversion. Bushnell's *Discourses on Christian Nurture* (1847) had advocated the importance of proper Christian childrearing over a dramatic conversion experience. This represented an important break with earlier notions of conversions, and opened the way for childrearing that emphasized loving relationships in the family rather than the sinful nature of individual children. Weaver endorsed this model, and urged his readers to raise families accordingly. At the same time, Weaver recognized the difficulties his readers would have in trying to live up to Bushnell's model in every instance. At the same time that he was imagining an ideal nuclear family, urging fathers to lead family religious services and mothers to provide spiritual nurture for her children, Weaver facilitated the efforts of those families attempting to reconnect, after the separations caused by slavery and war, by printing announcements by those seeking lost family members.

Weaver's immediate successor, Benjamin Tanner, did not continue printing Bushnell's writings, but his efforts were continuous with those of Weaver's in many ways. Tanner worked hard to

establish a children's newspaper that would provide a second venue for the promulgation of a domestic ideal. Financial realities stifled the paper, but for a time, beginning in 1870 and occasionally thereafter, the denomination produced a paper specifically for young readers.

In each case, the editors of the AMEC periodicals had dual motives and dual audiences. Both the *Christian Recorder* and the *Child's Recorder* provided platforms for leaders of the church to instruct the laity on the importance of a strong, child-centered, nuclear family, with clearly defined roles for fathers and mothers. Nevertheless, the reality of African American life meant that many of the material trappings of the culture's middle-class ideal would be out of the reach of many readers. Instead the editors and contributors turned even more to the emotional ties within the family and the importance of Christian nurture. The editors also were interested in promoting the denominational interests of the AMEC. Particularly in the years following the Civil War, churches were competing for black membership, and denominational newspapers were an important element of that competition. Moreover, the editors were aware that they would be addressing a white audience. A successful, high-quality denominational periodical would show white clerics that their black counterparts were a competent and essential part of mainstream Protestantism.

Gender issues outside of family life also concerned the editors of the *Christian Recorder*. In an era when the only position of authority for a black male was as a Protestant minister, the question of the possibility of female leadership in the church could be a touchy subject. Bailey carefully parses the various and often contradictory positions of editors and contributors as they debated the role of women in the church. As was the case in white churches, women often organized missionary societies on their own, only to find themselves under the control of male church leaders.

AMEC leaders also addressed the particular challenges of working black women and men. African American women, more often than their white counterparts, had to look for employment outside the home, and few professional opportunities were available for black men. Again, church leaders modified the domestic ideal to accommodate the reality of African American experience.

Around the Family Altar is a unique contribution to the history of the African American family, but it is not without its shortcomings. First, Bailey's sources are prescriptive rather than descriptive. A close reading of denominational periodicals can provide insight into the domestic ideal of church leaders, but it does not tell us much about how the readership of the papers or the black community more broadly responded to those prescriptions. Letters to the editors provide some variety, but readers will have to rely on other sources to understand the context of this book. Bailey writes, "Although similar familial concepts existed in white and black denominational literature, the particular historical circumstances of nineteenth-century African Americans led to distinct applications of the more generalized evangelical philosophies" (p. 110). By "application" Bailey means as the ideology is applied by religious intellectuals, not as it is lived in families.

With such a narrow range of subject and source materials, *Around the Family Altar* might have had more significance as an article than as a monograph. However, historians understand that our profession rewards the publication of a book more than the publication of a journal article. Nevertheless, scholars interested in the history of American families and of nineteenth-century religious institutions should not overlook Bailey's modest contribution.

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