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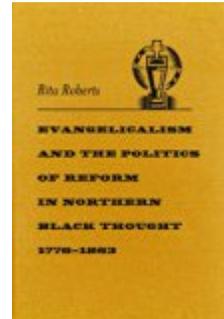
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rita Roberts. *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform in Northern Black Thought, 1776-1863*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010. x + 261 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3708-6.

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## The American Paradox: How African Americans Embraced a Country that Rejected them

In one of those ironic twists of history, when slavery was expanding and racial ideologies hardening, many African Americans during the age of revolution (1770-1830) took great pride in being an American. History wasn't kind to them during the "age of equality," yet many northern blacks developed a great affection for the new American nation. Proud to be Americans, beleaguered African Americans coalesced around religion to make sense of the world around them. In *Evangelicalism and the Politics of Reform in Northern Black Thought, 1776-1863*, historian Rita Roberts demonstrates how this happened. She argues that evangelical Christianity became the lens through which northern blacks viewed their shared oppression. Evangelical preachers cum activist-reformers provided their flocks with a newfound optimism that all Americans, both black and white, could one day live in a country that lived up to its ideals of liberty, equality, and a respect for the rule of law. In Roberts' view, this made northern blacks patriotic but it also made them major figures in helping to shape American democracy.

Divided into six chapters with a comprehensive bibliography, this well-researched and well-written study fills a gap in the literature. No other book tackles the paradox of why black Americans, oppressed by generations of white Americans, would declare their allegiance to a country that had largely rejected them. Roberts sets the stage for her argument in chapter 1 by providing context to American identity. She contends that

the conversion of persons of African descent to Protestant Christianity softened ethnic differences and allowed them to forge organizations with African names that "led blacks irrevocably down the road toward American identity" (p. 11). Christian converts such as Charles Bowles, Jeremiah Asher, Richard Allen, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, and the ever-pious Chloe Spear came to believe that they could help all Americans achieve fundamental human equality.

In chapter 2 Roberts demonstrates how African Americans' acceptance of Protestant Christianity informed their understanding of political rhetoric during the great age of Revolutionary pamphleteering. Through a process of what she calls "African Americanization," Roberts contends that blacks adopted republican ideals that "included belief in human equality, a commitment to universal liberty, and opposition to rigid social hierarchy" (p. 44). Furthermore, they embraced elements of the Scottish philosopher David Hume's thought, accepting his proposition that all humans were endowed with an innate moral sense that allowed them to discern right from wrong. Similarly, they imbibed the language of John Locke, drawing on his natural rights philosophy to underscore how oppressive it was to deny Americans, particularly black Americans, their basic rights and freedoms. Black writers and speakers advanced these arguments in newspapers, antislavery petitions, and public forums. In doing so, they sought to remind their audiences of the necessity of civic virtue, and especially the ways in

which the founding fathers had fallen short of the idealistic character with which they had created the republic.

One of Roberts' archetypes in this chapter is the fiery and irascible Lemuel Haynes. This biracial, hot-tempered New Englander was twenty-one years old when he was freed from his indenture in 1774. Shortly thereafter, he joined the Massachusetts military and Continental Army and fought against the British in the War for Independence. Surviving the Battle of Lexington and other Revolutionary battles, Haynes "readily embraced the patriot cause as his own and interpreted it within a religious mind-set" (p. 51). This led him to write numerous tracts and petitions in which he infused evangelical Christianity with a natural rights rhetoric. Roberts avers that Haynes "developed one of the earliest and most representative northern free black evangelical arguments for the establishment of universal freedom and equality in the new nation" (p. 51).

Chapters 3 and 4 constitute the most provocative parts of the book. Here Roberts discusses the expansion of slavery in the 1820s and 1830s and how a second generation of black evangelicals responded to this phenomenon. Buoyed by a sense of millennialism, and armed with a belief that America had a special mission in the world, editors, preachers, laymen, and teachers believed that God had sanctioned them to preserve the republic from the ills of slavery. Their activism resulted in a staggering array of literature, ranging from tracts and petitions to newspaper editorials, discussing the evils of slavery. Most significant of these writers was David Walker, a free-born black from North Carolina who spent a significant time in Boston, where he wrote "An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World" and other pamphlets articulating evangelical reform measures. He emphasized "reform, enlightenment, and black solidarity to southern and northern blacks," Roberts writes, and his work became a "symbol of a transition toward a more aggressive evangelical abolition movement in which human endeavor replaced reliance on divine intervention" (p. 81).

Roberts shows in chapter 5 how northern blacks responded to the massive outpouring of racial literature in the early decades of the nineteenth century. This scientific racial ideology buttressed white claims of superiority while undercutting black evangelical reform efforts. Reformers like Frederick Douglass, James McCune Smith,

Martin Delaney, and Hosea Easton took up their pens and launched an aggressive effort to rebut racist rhetoric spewed by white ethnologists and preachers while at the same time advancing racial theories of their own. Easton, a Presbyterian minister, grew particularly alarmed that his fellow ministers could advance such hateful rhetoric. Preachers, he wrote in 1837, believed that "racial doctrine was an extremely useful and practical tool for controlling blacks and protecting white status in the South and North." Consequently, he explained, it "provided the manpower to control slaves and reduced or nearly eliminated black competition for jobs and housing" (p. 134).

The final segment, chapter 6, explains how American identity waned in the turbulent decades leading up to the Civil War and then reemerged as many Americans came to see the conflict as a fulfillment of millennial aspirations. During the 1850s, as the government passed a series of fugitive slave laws and territorial acts designed to extend slavery in the western territories, Americans grew weary of trying to help their country achieve its divinely approved mission of extending rights and liberties to disenfranchised persons. But Lincoln's election in 1860 and the secessionist movement of the same year had a way of re-instilling those values and helping Americans realize that the black quest for constitutional rights was inextricably linked to the American quest for the same rights. Roberts concludes the book in 1863, just as the war was beginning, leaving the reader to wonder how it affected American nationalism and the Reconstruction efforts that followed. Nevertheless, her story is a good one, and a provocative one. She asks good questions and provides compelling answers. At times, though, her analysis falls short, as, for example, when she ignores the free blacks who joined the British cause in 1776, or fails to explain how Frederick Douglass, a major figure in her book, could give an aggressive speech in 1852 postulating that the Fourth of July was not a holiday he enjoyed. Blacks did not profit from the ideals and freedoms enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, he said, and for that reason alone it was not a holiday worth celebrating.

Despite these criticisms, this is an important book. Evangelical Christianity provided black reformers with a shared language and identity that brought them together and taught them what it meant to be an American. It also fostered in them a strong sense of self—a conviction that they could lead the way in teaching white Americans how to achieve a free and equal nation.

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