

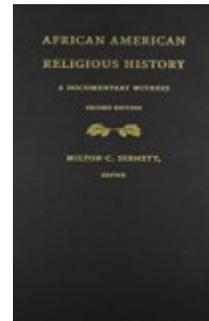
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Milton Sernett, ed. *African American Religion: A Documentary Witness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999. x + 608 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-2449-2; \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-2426-3.

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## Witness to the Unwritten Story: African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness

Certain books are pivotal in generating more questions than the book itself can answer. Milton Sernett's anthology of primary sources *African American Religious History, A Documentary Witness*, is that type of book. In its second edition, Sernett's book stands as a monument to a book not yet written, the definitive history of African American religion. Professors like myself long for a companion text to this volume to use in teaching African American religious history. In lieu of that much anticipated and needed volume however, Sernett's effort stands the test of time since its first appearance in 1985 for its ability to bring together important primary source documents and stories that give an effective introduction to the religious history of African Americans.

The first edition of this book, published in 1985, was designed, in Sernett's words, to dispel the myth of invisibility of African American religion because of the inadequacy of resources. The second edition, emerging after fifteen years of vigorous studies of groups and personages within African American religion, still holds an important place within African American religious history texts as an accessible collection of primary source materials covering most of the scope of the religious experience of African Americans. The broad appeal and usage of the original volume in seminaries, universities, colleges, and churches is a testament to the veracity and tenacity of the stories within the volume. With such a diverse appeal, one might be tempted to discount the value of such a text. However, the power of the personal testimonies, arranged strategically to form a historical frame-

work, stand on their own, and do not overtly suggest a particular worldview or agenda.

The volume of material covers a period from the late eighteenth century until the early 1980s. The excerpts are divided into eight sections, representing different historical periods, regional variations, and non-Christian expressions of African American religion. Interestingly enough, the volume begins with a selection from Olaudah Equiano, "Traditional Ibo Religion and Culture." With this choice, Sernett is giving a nod to the debate that still fuels academic research in African American Studies, the Melville Herskovits- E. Franklin Frazier debate, on the retention or non-retention of African cultural elements within African American life.[1] Sernett addresses this debate obliquely in his original introduction, yet some current mention on the current state of the debate on the issue of African retentions would have been helpful.

The effectiveness of the organization of the anthology allows for the religious experiences of African Americans and the diversity contained within those experiences to come alive within the text. Improving on his sources in the first edition, Sernett includes more primary sources from or about women, and emphasizes the Great Migration as a watershed period in the development of African American Religion. Missionary activities of African Americans after the civil war are also included. Readers in African American religion will find familiar voices within this anthology such as Martin Luther King Jr. and W.E.B. Dubois, as well as lesser-known personages

such as Amanda Smith, Reverdy Ransom, or C.H. Mason (penned by wife, Elsie Mason). The text is arranged in loose chronological order, with Sernett providing at the beginning of each segment of primary source material, context of the source, a brief biographical sketch of the writer, the excerpt used, and the citation of the larger source. A short bibliography at the end of each excerpt highlights additional supplementary reading material for the particular passage.

Overall, the contents and organization of the text make an effective tool for the study and introduction to many of the ideas, issues, and people in African American Religious history. Readers should note that this is an overwhelmingly Protestant view of African American religious history, although an insightful section on alternative religious expressions gives some focus to the anthology. Missing are excerpts from Malcolm X, Edward Wilmot Blyden and others that would enhance some of the existing documents used. Sernett admits that this edition corrects numerous factual errors from the first volume, however, some small errors are still carried forward.[2] Noticeably missing is a companion piece on Womanist Theology in contrast to the excerpt on Black theology.

These shortcomings are minor, however, in the scope of this text. As one who has used this text as both graduate student and professor, the value of accessible pri-

mary source material in a concise form as an introduction to particular topical issues is invaluable. Those who use the text with knowledge of African American history will find it an interesting springboard for article and research topics. Others assigned to read excerpts of the text as part of course requirements will find it accessible and entertaining. In short, this is a text that has legs, so to speak, and will serve a variety of tasks quite well until a comprehensive history is written on African American religion.

#### Notes

[1]. See Melville J. Herskovitz, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1958; and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*. New York, Schocken Books, 1964. Herskovitz, an Anthropologist, argued for African holdovers in African American culture, while Frazier, a Sociologist, claimed that those holdovers were erased by the devastation of slavery. For further information see Joseph Holloway's book, *Africanisms in American Culture* (Indiana University Press, 1990).

[2]. See pg. 315. The Azusa Street revival began in 1906, not 1907.

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