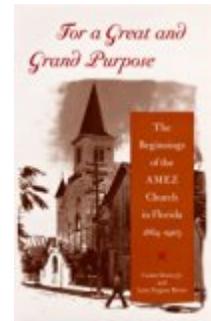


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Canter Jr., Brown, Larry Eugene Rivers. *For a Great and Grand Purpose: The Beginnings of the AMEZ Church in Florida, 1864-1905*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. xvi + 252 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2778-4.

Reviewed by Lee Willis (Department of History, Florida State University)
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The AMEZ Church in Florida: A Great Purpose, Not So Grand Results

One of the most fruitful fields within southern historiography since the 1970s has been scholarship on African-American religion. New social historians in particular have demonstrated how blacks embraced evangelical Christianity and employed religion as an agent to achieve greater civil rights and fight oppression both before and after the Civil War. In recent years, however, scholars have looked more critically at the black churches and discovered class and gender tensions that affected reform efforts in the late-nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries.[1] Amid this historiographical shift, Canter Brown Jr. and Larry Eugene Rivers present *For a Great and Grand Purpose*, a carefully researched account of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church's first forty years in Florida, 1864-1905.

As the authors point out in their introduction, no other state study on the Zion church exists and Zionites have largely been ignored in comparison to their numerically superior cousin, the AME church. Though both churches emphasized similar Methodist theology, AMEZ leaders shunned political participation in favor of moral crusades (such as temperance) and the AME became a bulwark for black public advancement. In Florida and elsewhere, this difference made the Zion church far less appealing and as a result, the denomination struggled throughout its first four decades in the state. Other factors, including economic uncertainty (made worse by environmental disasters) and white redemption severely limited missionary efforts. In addition, the church suffered from poor leadership and planning. Though the

state remained predominately rural until the twentieth century, the AMEZ focused its efforts on Florida's far-flung urban centers in Key West, Tampa, and Pensacola. Meanwhile, the AME and Baptist churches concentrated on middle Florida, the panhandle cotton belt between the Apalachicola and Suwannee Rivers, where most freedmen and women resided. Still, the authors argue, the AMEZ church in Florida provided a valuable "moral tone" and solace to its adherents during times of stress.

An exception to the questionable leadership, according to the Brown and Rivers, was Bishop Thomas Henry Lomax. A North Carolina native, Lomax came to Florida in 1888 and guided the church through a period of relative prosperity. Temporarily flushed with the growth of cigar, timber, and phosphate industries in the late 1880s, Zion congregations began to grow. The Panic of 1893 tempered their growth, however, and a devastating freeze in 1895 led to plummeting church coffers. To combat the dwindling numbers of trained clergy, Lomax became a champion of female ordination. Details on their ministries are scant, but under Lomax, Mary V. Anderson and Mrs. G.V. Kirby served the Florida conference. The authors laud the bishop's progressive measures while also admitting that his actions hurt the small church's popularity.

The authors conclude the book on an upbeat note, emphasizing Zion's spread into new urban centers created by spreading railroad lines. Since the church had never pushed for political involvement, Jim Crow

had fewer implications in comparison to the politically-minded AME. Nevertheless, segregation diminished the lives of Zionites, many of whom would choose to leave the state during the Great Migration.

Though Brown and Rivers ably assemble what is clearly a dearth of primary sources, they are reluctant to address ongoing historiographical conversations, particularly in the field of gender. For example, the authors place women's involvement at the center of their subject matter, but they do not explain how the female Zionite experience in Florida relates to what historians have argued about southern women in other studies. Brown and Rivers would have done well to engage Glenda Gilmore's *Gender and Jim Crow*. Gilmore demonstrated how black women could use moral reform movements such as the WCTU as a way to wrangle improvements for their communities. Had the authors referenced Gilmore they would have also found an exception to their insistence that no serious study of the Zion church has been produced to date. Gilmore placed North Carolina Zionite Sarah Dudley Pettey, wife of an AMEZ bishop, in a central role in her path breaking work.[2]

Furthermore, the authors claim that Zion's support of moral reforms instead of political battles made the church more appealing to women. While the assertion is logical, the argument is not backed by the evidence presented. The only temperance organization mentioned is the International Order of Good Templars, a male-dominated organization. If women pushed the temperance agenda, the authors offer no evidence that they did so. The WCTU, an important part of Gilmore's study, is never mentioned.

Brown and Rivers do mention Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's important work on gender and the black church, *Righteous Discontent*, but they do not tackle her arguments. For example, Higginbotham addressed how black women's participation in Baptist church life functioned as a criticism of black patriarchy. Was Florida's AMEZ female participation likewise a form of protest? The question remains unanswered. The authors' decision to remain silent on these issues could be based on caution. Their primary source material is thin. Yet a benefit of state studies is to provide greater detail and explain how smaller regions compare to the South or nation as a whole.

While the book's discussion of gender is limited, Brown and Rivers do build on William E. Montgomery's *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree* to explore class as an important factor in the Zion church. Montgomery revealed that the AME church suffered class divisions that produced tension and hampered development. The AMEZ church in Florida suffered similarly. Originally oriented toward the urban middle class, the church unsuccessfully reached out to laborers who migrated to the state's growing cigar, phosphate, and timber industries. Losing its class identity, church leaders found that the middling and laboring classes "often clashed, with the church reluctant to express an opinion that could fully satisfy either body" (p. 169).

Despite the book's thin source material, *For a Great and Grand Purpose* brings a heretofore overshadowed denomination to light and therefore its contents should be consulted in future studies. Helpful appendices provide the names and appointments of AMEZ ministers and a detailed timeline. Historians without an intrinsic interest in the details of Florida history may not find the book particularly engaging, but scholars of African-American and southern religion would be remiss if they do not reference the work's useful endnotes.

Notes

[1] For example, see J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics and White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993); Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities Among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[2] Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, pp. xv-xvi, 12, 16-18, 101-102, 133-134.

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