

Jeroen Dewulf, *Afro-Atlantic Catholics: America's First Black Christians*. Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022. ix + 321 pp. (Cloth US\$ 65.00)

Afro-Atlantic Catholics culminates the research that Jeroen Dewulf began for *The Pinkster King and the King of Kongo* (2016). That research led him to see how the Kingdom of Kongo was entangled in the cultural and political transformations that came with European expansion, particularly in the Catholic and festive practices that Afrodescendants developed in the Americas, as explored in *The Pinkster King* and *From the Kingdom of Kongo to Congo Square* (2017). While those previous books focused on the festive traditions derived from the Kingdom of Kongo and influenced by Iberian Catholicism, Dewulf now turns his full attention to Catholicism's role in the emergence of Afro-Atlantic creoles. The book is a welcome reminder that Black religion in the Americas began with Catholics, especially as recent scholarship on Black religion in the United States and other reaches of Protestantism pays little attention to the enduring Catholic roots of Black religious and social practices.

Afro-Atlantic Catholics consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. In the brief introduction and throughout, Dewulf details how his work engages with previous scholarship, such as Ira Berlin's, and builds on new research, like that of John Thornton, Linda Heywood, and Cecile Fromont. Inspired by Fromont's work on Catholicism in the Kongo and beyond, Dewulf adapts the term Afro-Atlantic Catholics "in reference to those Africans who in early modern times embraced Iberian Catholicism, yet adjusted and reinterpreted [it] in accordance with their traditional beliefs and traditions" (p. 8). Thus, some of the main takeaways from the book include that "Afro-Atlantic Catholics lived their faith at the margins of society" and that "the Church failed to understand their songs and dances as genuine expressions of Christian faith" (p. 8). These are two conclusions that need to be qualified. They are particularly surprising given Dewulf's knowledge of the Iberian world, where Black Catholic brotherhoods played leading roles in great public and religious festivals (see Miguel Valerio, *Sovereign Joy: Afro-Mexicans Kings and Queens, 1539–1640* [2022]). They may have been marginal in a Protestant, anti-Catholic society like Dutch New York, but what about Catholic cities such as Baltimore, New Orleans, and St. Louis?

Dewulf begins his analysis, in Chapter 1, by looking at Black Catholic practices in late medieval Portugal, where Afro-Iberians joined and founded Catholic brotherhoods, or confraternities. These confraternities began the practice of electing and crowning a royal court—imitating a European tradition, Dewulf contends. These Black royal courts appear in the Pinkster king ceremony Dewulf studied in *The Pinkster King* and are a predecessor of the Mardi

Gras Indians he studied in *From the Kingdom of Kongo to Congo Square*—not to mention the whole Atlantic. Dewulf then traces these practices—confraternities and Black royal courts—through Central Africa and the Americas in Chapters 2 and 3. These chapters show how Central Africans embraced Catholicism and took it with them to the Americas. For these Africans, confraternities, as mutual aid societies, were crucial for their survival. In the Catholic world, brotherhoods were the surest safety net Afrodescendants could rely on. They allowed Atlantic Creoles to form community and live quasi-autonomous lives. Confraternities allowed Africans to adapt their festive traditions to the Catholic calendar.

The book's most important contribution is Chapter 4, which explores the Black Catholic communities of Dutch New York. Dewulf underscores how these Black Catholics came to New York from Africa, often through Brazil and the Caribbean. As he emphasizes, many of the enslaved and free Blacks in the charter generation were Catholics. He rightly argues that these Black Catholics left a lasting legacy on the way Black Christianity would develop in the United States. For example, Catholic confraternities inspired the mutual aid societies founded by Protestant Blacks in later centuries. Therefore, as he concludes, a third important source of U.S. Black Christianity has long been neglected.

Dewulf's arguments would have been stronger if he had included in his analysis other places with strong Black Catholic communities, such as Baltimore, Philadelphia, New Orleans, and St. Louis late, into the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, his superb, exhaustively researched, well-written and eloquently argued analysis is an important start for looking at this neglected root of Black Christianity in the Protestant Americas. As Dewulf reminds us, Catholicism, not just Protestantism, was central to the lives many Blacks fashioned in North America.

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