

Faith and the Freedpeople

Turner, Nicole Myers. *Soul Liberty: The Evolution of Black Religious Politics in Postemancipation Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. xx + 209 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 9781469655239.

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Nicole Myers Tuner's *Soul Liberty: The Evolution of Black Religious Politics in Postemancipation Virginia* is a nuanced account of the evolution of Virginia's independent Black churches and their relationship with postemancipation politics. She argues that the "full extent and significance of the intersection between black religion and politics" can only be understood by examining the local dynamics of "interactions between white and black people, congregations and ministers, and churches and electoral politics" (9). Turner uncovers and interprets these interactions through a careful reading of Virginia's Black church convention and association minutes from emancipation through the 1880s, and deftly contextualizes her interpretation within Reconstruction Era state politics and the freedpeople's experiences more broadly. Although the concept of "soul liberty" is a historical Baptist distinctive, she applies it to the religious aspirations of all churchgoing freedpeople, regardless of denominational affiliation. Turner also pays close attention to gender as a category of analysis throughout her analysis. Turner's work is primarily in conversation with Black church scholarship, but it is also well informed by the leading works on Reconstruction, postemancipation politics, and the larger lived experience of the freedpeople.

Turner develops her argument over five chapters. She begins by exploring the kinds of experiences Black churches dealt with during the early years of emancipation, focusing especially on how they leveraged their relationship with the Freedmen's Bureau to ensure their legal and property rights and their freedom of worship. To both illustrate the diversity of the freedpeople's experiences and to anchor her narrative, she focuses on Gilfield Baptist Church (Petersburg), which long predated the Civil War, but was not pastored by Black men consistently until after emancipation; St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, the first Black Episcopal church in Virginia; and the small Reformed Zion Union Apostolic church denomination (RZUA), which originated with congregations that broke away from the Baptists and Episcopalians in Brunswick and Mecklenburg counties in the southside region of Virginia.

Turner turns to a close analysis of what the late 1860s church convention records reveal about the political space that was the church. She finds that the freedpeople used the church to demonstrate their readiness for self-government; to negotiate their conceptions of manhood, womanhood, and citizenship; and to articulate their religious and political identities. She uses Gilfield Baptist Church records to explore the evolution of such

gender-related issues as the rise of the male pastor, concerns about respectability, and the pastor's increasing authority vis-à-vis the laity. She argues that the respectability Black men increasingly needed and wanted in relation to white people in public political spaces increasingly influenced their treatment of women in church spaces. She sadly concludes: "Behind the narrative of centralized black ministerial leadership is the backstory of the suppression of dissent and the marginalization of women" (80).

Complimenting and reinforcing the rising prominence of male clergy were ongoing Black-white negotiations over education. Here Turner focuses mostly on the Episcopal church and the RZUA. Even though the records are incomplete and ambiguous, Turner skillfully teases out a plausible plot and interprets its meaning. As with Black church adherents elsewhere, there was a desire among RZUA members for an educated clergy, and their lack of resources required them to look to white people for that education. The Episcopal Church offered to create a school to educate RZUA clergy but that tied into conversations about incorporating the RZUA churches into the Episcopal Church. Turner interprets her sources to reveal that the Episcopal Church was mostly interested in an educated RZUA clergy so that its parishioners would remain both satisfied with and segregated from all white Episcopalian congregations and to make it unnecessary for northern whites to offer that education. Key elements of this story were replicated between Virginia's Black Baptists and the northern-based American Baptist Home Mission Society, which founded Richmond Theological Seminary for Black Virginia ministers. Clergy studying in white-run schools then became political actors as they began to call for educational opportunities for Black women.

The book climaxes by exploring the intersection between Black churchgoers and the politics of the Readjuster Party, which dominated state politics between 1879 and 1885 and represented the highwater mark of Virginia's Reconstruction. Their path to victory was largely based on successful appeals to both Black and white manual laborers and farmers. The Readjuster government successfully "readjusted" (reduced) the state's debt obligations, funded the state's public schools, funded a normal school for Black teachers, and ended the use of the public whipping post, while also appointing many Blacks to patronage positions. Turner argues that Black people "used their religious networks to trade political support for the advancement of black political and social goals" (120–21). Turner ends by employing GIS mapping tools to search for correlations between Black church networks and political participation. She concludes that while the patronage requests had an "uncanny" resemblance to the geographic range of the Black church associations, ironically, these Black networks did not predict political allegiances.

What I probably appreciate most about Dr. Turner's book is how forthcoming she is when explaining how her research intersects with major themes in Black church scholarship. She maintains that the Black church experience in Virginia suggests that the prominence of male clergy was a result of a process and not a given, that discourse about an educated clergy was driven as much by internal church debates as by external racial concerns, and that Black churches were "not caught between being an opiate or an inspiration; they were caught in the position of mediating black life on totally new terms" (2). Turner also pushes the reader to see that "the black church" means so much more than "black preachers" when she talks about Black religious politics. She argues that when Black preachers spoke out, they were speaking for their parishioners, not themselves, and that the laity often voted in such a manner as to demonstrate that fact. That said, there was more than one occasion where I felt she was stretching to "read" her conclusions from her sources as she described them. And yet, while some of her interpretations might feel like a stretch, they align with what we generally know about the lives of the freedpeople and the

Black church in this era. I am most perplexed, however, about her assertion that her story “does not stand in for the story of every black church community” (10). Judicious scholars have never made such claims for “community” studies of this nature, but thoughtful, localized studies such as this book, do, in fact, give us insight into larger conversations and themes. And on those terms, *Soul Liberty* succeeds magnificently.

The Wind at His Back: American Public Opinion and Theodore Roosevelt’s Foreign Policy

Thompson, John M. *Great Power Rising: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. x + 270 pp. \$36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-085995-4.

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The emergence of the United States as a global power in the early twentieth century has long fascinated historians of U.S. foreign relations. In this book, John M. Thompson offers a unique contribution to this well-studied topic by examining public opinion and the politics surrounding Theodore Roosevelt’s foreign policy decision-making. As Thompson observes, most historians portray Roosevelt as an activist president constrained from doing more to assert U.S. power overseas by “an isolationist and indifferent public and Congress” (3). Thompson disputes this interpretation, arguing that Roosevelt correctly perceived that “most of the time, his agenda reflected ideas that were acceptable to a majority of Americans” (5). A favorable political climate and Roosevelt’s influence over both public opinion and Congress allowed him to achieve his diplomatic-military goals and a broader quest to translate America’s “latent strength into great power status” (183).

Thompson most effectively defends his argument in chapters analyzing several important diplomatic episodes during Roosevelt’s presidency. These include the Venezuelan crisis of 1902–1903, the U.S. intervention in Panama that led to the construction of the isthmian canal, the development of the Roosevelt Corollary, naval expansion, and tensions with China and Japan over immigration. In his analysis of these events, Thompson exhaustively mines an array of newspapers and journals, congressional debates, and the correspondence of Roosevelt and other leading political figures to get a sense of public opinion. He details Roosevelt’s assessment of the political environment he faced, the tactics he pursued to shape it, and the impact it had on his policy choices. At times, Roosevelt faced opposition strong enough to cause him to modify his policy preferences, as in the case of immigration legislation. But Thompson shows that such an outcome was uncommon, and, more often, Roosevelt’s policies resonated with public opinion, boosting his popularity.