

theologiae, as an aid or illustration of a religious truth, but can in itself become a *locus theologicus*" (3). This admirable collection is indeed one such location.

JACK DUDLEY

Mount St. Mary's University, MD, USA
dudley@msmary.edu

The Souls of Womenfolk: The Religious Cultures of Enslaved Women in the Lower South. By Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. xii + 307 pages. \$27.95 (paper).

doi:10.1017/hor.2023.75

I must begin this review by stating that I wish I had had this book when I was studying Black religion and spirituality as a graduate student. Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh's insightful and thoroughly researched book on enslaved Black women's spirituality is a major contribution to womanist discourse, history, and research. Wells-Oghoghomeh takes the reader on a journey that begins in Africa, and then situates itself within the genesis of the enslaved women's spiritual journey from Africa. Her writing sheds light on the ways that Black women's spiritual resilience and embodied practices have been resources for their survival of trauma (enslavement, rape, separation from family, death) and highlights the rituals and spiritual practices of African women as they were forced to find a "home" in America.

The book includes not only archival research and first-person accounts of the enslaved women's experience but also a retrieval of archival sources through secondhand accounts and other narrations, such as autobiographical narratives, cultural expressions, and the body ritual and religious practices. Wells-Oghoghomeh focuses her research on the lives of the enslaved women on the plantations within Georgia. As she states, Georgia housed religious and cultural elements that cut across state boundaries to the greater Atlantic.

For her research into the inner lives of enslaved African women of Georgia, she placed the narratives of these women into dialogue with the cultural practices of areas along the West African geographical coast (Upper Guinea, Cape Verde Islands, areas along the Senegal River, as well as areas now known as Sierra Leone and Liberia). The journey of enslavement is thoroughly researched and quite disturbing. As she writes, "The dismembering experiences that would knit enslaved persons together in personal and collective memory and form the basis for enslaved women's religious consciousness did

not begin in the Middle Passage but rather amid the escalating political and social turmoil of the Upper Guinea coast" (25).

The author cautions that this journey and research of enslaved African women's religious experience cannot be marked within a linear historical narrative, which makes this volume extremely challenging to read. She focuses on several important aspects of religious experience among the enslaved: moral dimensions of motherhood; sexual ethics and social values; ritual; gendered performance in religious spaces; and women, power, and the sacred imagination. For each of these themes, she focuses on historical data as well narrative and other sources. Readers may at times sense they are reading an anthropological manuscript as well as a historical religious text.

Her chapter entitled "Spirit Bodies and Feminine Souls" offers insight into the power of the African folktale in the spiritual life of the enslaved. Wells-Oghoghomeh offers new insights into the power of folktale to heal communal trauma while also serving as a repository for communal histories, ethics, and cosmologies inherited and developed by the enslaved. With such stories as "The People Could Fly," Wells-Oghoghomeh maintains that these stories were meditations on freedom choice and enslavement.

Also of particular note is the journey of Christianity within the enslaved women's religious experience. Through Wells-Oghoghomeh's research, one sees that this journey was not a linear one of fully accepting the Christianity of the white oppressor/enslaver but intricately wove together the enslaved experience and memory of their African heritage. Those enslaved women developed a new mode of religion that responded to their needs. Wells-Oghoghomeh's contribution to womanist discourse is a thoroughly researched tome that clearly acknowledges Black women's contribution to the origin of African American religion.

This book is recommended for those doing graduate work in religion and not as an introduction for religion and theology majors. The density of the research, though welcome, sometimes obscures the focus on the spiritual and religious aspects that the author may also wish to convey. This is primarily a book focused on the "culture" and context of the enslaved woman, which has not previously been researched to the depth that this writer has conveyed. It is an important text that should be included as a resource for any theological educator who is focused on religious experience, spirituality, and anthropology.

C. VANESSA WHITE

Catholic Theological Union, USA

vwhite@ctu.edu