

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 - 1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1993).

This intriguing book has implications for at least four distinct areas of American History. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's careful archival research on a wide range of Black educational and religious institutions provides new and important insights on race relations, the African-American religious experience, women's experience in the Black churches and American women's activism in the Progressive era. In documenting the critical role African-American-Baptist women played in building and sustaining important Black cultural and social institutions, Higginbotham demonstrates that nothing, not even "ladylike behavior," is ever as simple as it seems. The book is timely, too, given on the one hand, the attacks of American neoconservatives on "welfare queens," by which is clearly meant African-American women and, on the other hand, calls from within the African-American community itself for Black men to assert their manhood, which at least in part suggest that Black men should reclaim their proper authority from Black women who have supposedly misappropriated it. Higginbotham reminds us of the crucial importance of the enormous efforts and sacrifices made by generations of African-American women in the struggle against American racism.

Higginbotham's discussion of the gender dimensions of W.E.B. DuBois's famous call for the emergence of a "Talented Tenth" among Black Americans reveals the way in which goals shared by the white and Black communities could reflect substantially different agendas. White Baptist missionaries to the South fostered the development of college-level education for Southern Blacks as part of a program of race-management. Black Baptist women, many of them working as domestic servants, raised thousands of dollars to support these institutions as a means of providing a training-ground for Black leadership — leadership which would articulate the distinctive aspirations of the African-American community. Northern-Baptist women supported teacher training for African-Ameri-

can women in the hopes of creating a potent instrument for the inculcation of Yankee Protestant values among American Blacks. Black-Baptist women sacrificed out of their meager wages so that their daughters would not have to scrub floors or take in washing.

Despite these divergent agendas, Higginbotham discovered a surprising degree of interracial cooperation between Black-Southern women and white-Northern women. Shared religious convictions and shared beliefs about the potential for female benevolence could undermine racial barriers. Higginbotham's nuanced exploration of the interaction between white- and Black-female activists reveals that the motives of the former were not invariably manipulative, condescending and paternalistic. To the extent to which African-American women were seen to conform to white standards of middle-class respectability, these interracial contacts went some distance to undermine negative stereotypes of Black womanhood in the minds of white Northern-Baptist women. Although Northern-Baptist women may have supposed that they provided Black Baptist women with role models, their support for female education created the conditions in which African-American women could emerge as role models for their own communities. Through their focus on "women's work for women," Northern-Baptist women gave important emphasis to the issue of gender at a time when the race question might otherwise have overwhelmed it.

Higginbotham prods the reader to reexamine prevailing assumptions about race and religion at several points, but most particularly in her chapter entitled "The Politics of Respectability." Here she argues that the embrace of the standards of white middle-class respectability by Black women and indeed their attempts to impose these standards on less affluent members of their own communities represents not colonization, but a strategic initiative. Admittedly, there was a cost. Middle-class African American women eschewed some of the vibrant cultural traditions of their own people in their embrace of Victorian moralism, but they did so in the hopes of

dispelling pejorative racial stereotypes and providing for the physical safety of Black women. They invested respectable behavior with meanings reflective of their own values. More importantly, Black women controlled the dissemination of these values through female led organizations such as the Women's Convention of the National Baptist Convention. By creating institutions of this kind, they laid the foundation for resistance to and rejection of white domination.

Ironically, Higginbotham's discussion of these women as Baptists is the one problem in her analysis. She locates the experience of Black-Baptist-female activists such as Virginia Broughton in what Rosemary Reuther and Eleanor McLaughlin describe as a "stance of 'radical obedience,'" (122) and she demonstrates how African-American-Baptist women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century reinterpreted the Christian scriptures in ways that enabled them to engage in public activism. Yet, despite their gender consciousness and their activism, Black-Baptist women stopped short of seeking ministerial roles in the Baptist church. In the light of the recent controversy over the ordination of women that fragmented the (white) Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s, there may well be something inherently, although not exclusively, Baptist about the conviction that women must be subordinated to a male ministry. Given their commitment to racial equality and to gender equality in other areas of life, how did African-American-Baptist women reconcile themselves to this challenge? In *Righteous Discontent*, Higginbotham concedes that although Black women cherished high aspirations for their families and themselves, the racist climate of America taught them to moderate their expectations. One wonders if perhaps some of their lessons in the limits of the possible were learned in church.

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