

The Roots and Routes of African Religious Beliefs in the Atlantic World

*By Matt D. Childs*

This article analyzes how historians have framed and studied the relationship between slavery and religion in the Atlantic world from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. In surveying the historiography, it becomes readily apparent that historians are far more interested in writing about Christianity among the enslaved than the religious histories of African-descended peoples' diverse belief systems. It has been more common for historians to study how cosmologies in Africa became religions in the Americas because of the basic ideas that structure history as a discipline. Historical scholarship with a thematic focus on religion has a long tradition of examining how various heterogenous religious systems became incorporated into Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy. By contrast, African religions that display parallel belief systems, eclectic incorporation of multiple cosmologies, religious authority not tied to a text, secret and undocumented initiation ceremonies, and a stubborn disregard for time as a linear process have made it difficult to analyze their customs, traditions, and belief systems through a historical framework. Consequently, African and neo-African religions in the Americas such as Santeria, Candomblé, and Vodun continue to draw the attention largely of anthropologists, whereas historians are more comfortable working within the change-over-time model and a narrative structure of Christian creolization.