

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

Religion Faculty Works

Religion

---

9-1-2006

### Review Of "Creole Religions Of The Caribbean: An Introduction From Vodou And Santeria To Obeah And Espiritismo" By M.F. Olmos And L. Paravisini-Gebert

Yvonne Patricia Chireau  
Swarthmore College, ychirea1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Yvonne Patricia Chireau. (2006). "Review Of "Creole Religions Of The Caribbean: An Introduction From Vodou And Santeria To Obeah And Espiritismo" By M.F. Olmos And L. Paravisini-Gebert". *Church History*. Volume 75, Issue 3. 705-706. DOI: 10.1017/S0009640700099017  
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion/4>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

chapter can be strung together to form a coherent narrative. Yet there is little doubt that *Themes in Religion and American Culture* is a timely text. The study of North American religions has grown well beyond its roots as a subdiscipline of American intellectual history, and the field is now broad enough to support synthetic works that eschew chronology in favor of organizational schemes that are more compatible with the methods of scholars trained in anthropology, gender studies, literature, or sociology. For instructors seeking narrative coherence for thematic courses, this innovative, comprehensive, and provocative collection of essays may be the most important textbook on North American religions to appear in more than two decades.

Douglas L. Winiarski  
University of Richmond

***Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santeria to Obeah and Spiritismo.* By Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. Religion, Race, and Ethnicity Series. New York: New York University Press, 2003. x + 262 pp. \$19.00 paper.**

*Creole Religions of the Caribbean* is a cross-disciplinary introduction to the sweeping variety of African-based religious traditions and practices that can be found across the Caribbean islands and the United States, as well as the Caribbean diaspora that entails South, Central, and North America. Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert seek to identify the characteristics of these vibrant religions and their accompanying practices and to provide an historical background of their formation. They limit their investigation to those religions that are "most pervasive" in the island regions, such as Vodou in Haiti, Santeria/Regla de Ocha in Cuba, Rastafari in Jamaica, and ritual-based healing and harming traditions such as Obeah and Quimbois that are located in the French-speaking West Indies.

Creole religions are syncretic, with sources that derive from diverse religious origins, including European Christianity, indigenous African religions, and native American spiritual traditions. Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert frame their essays using the ideas of "syncretism" and "creolization" as categories that describe the complex processes by which these traditions developed and often thrived, even under the duress of slavery, colonization, and social oppression. *Creolization* refers to the "malleability and mutability of various beliefs and practices" in circumstances where the intersecting experiences of race, gender, class, labor, power, and sexuality determine their constitution, while *syncretism* refers to the transformation of these traditions as the result of processes of "renegotiation, reorganization, and redefinition of clashing belief systems" (7). The authors emphasize that the latter idea as a condition pertaining to Afro-Caribbean religions has resulted in dynamic, evolutionary, resistant, and empowering forms of spirituality.

Creole religions share notable characteristics, including a complementary "monotheism" and "polytheism" with respect to ideas of deity; they are also characterized by cosmologies that posit human-spiritual interactions that are manifested by mediations with ancestors, elemental and supernatural forces ("animistic beliefs"), as well as central ritual practices such as initiation, sacrifice, divination, and healing. In the book's introduction Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert suggest that underlying the religious diversity of Creole religions are orientations that might differentiate these traditions

from non-Creole religions, such as “magic” or “magical accumulation.” It is not clear that these categories are useful in examining these religions from a comparative perspective, given that many of these fundamental features are found in non-Creole religions, although they are certainly manifested in these through particular practices, ideas, and expressions.

The first chapter provides a brief historical background that situates the emergence of Creole religions in the context of the developing Atlantic sugar economy, with the consolidation of slavery systems in the colonial plantations of England, France, and Spain. The patterns of importation of enslaved African people, shaped by the exigencies of production within the sugar-producing regions, helped to form the development of Creole or hybrid religious practices in environments in which intense cultural exchanges between ethnic groups took place. The rise and fall of sugar production in the Caribbean from the fifteenth to the late nineteenth centuries is very much a story of the regional demographic shifts to which the fates of Africans and their religious descendents were tied. The historical background provides an appropriate framework with which to conceptualize the varied spiritual traditions that sprang from profound social and cultural transformations in the diasporic world.

Later chapters utilize secondary sources to situate the Creole religions within their lived and historical contexts, creating a synthesis of descriptive materials from ethnographic studies as well as academic narratives. Lesser-known traditions among scholars of religion, such as Regla de Palo and Espiritismo, are given equal weight. Although the authors promise to avoid “essentialist definitions of religious experience” in favor of a practice-based approach, methodological considerations do prevail in this sometimes dense *ajajico* of voices and perspectives. *Creole Religions of the Caribbean* is best read as an information-packed, richly illustrated sourcebook for teaching about specific Caribbean sacred traditions, rather than an analysis of New World spiritual expressions, in which the concept of “creole” might serve as an alternative analytic metaphor for the study of African-based religions.

Yvonne Chireau  
Swarthmore College

***The Church and Mary.*** Edited by R. N. Swanson. Studies in Church History 39. Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell and Brewer for the Ecclesiastical History Society, 2004. xvi + 377 pp. \$75.00 cloth.

This collection consists of papers read at the 2001 summer meeting and the 2002 winter meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society on the topic of Mary from a variety of perspectives. The brief introduction by Henry Mayr-Harting attributes recent interest in Mary to new publications and to Mary’s importance in the ecumenical movement. He identifies as an advantage of the topic its interdisciplinary scope reflected in papers on theology, liturgy, art, musicology, gender studies, literature, social anthropology, and straight history. He admits that while this theme lends itself to worldwide studies, in spite of a good paper on Ethiopia, the volume is Euro- and Anglo-centric.

The collection falls into four parts: the first seven essays describe the place of Mary in Eastern Orthodoxy while the next seven discuss Marian devotion in the West. Five essays then discuss Marian devotion at the Reformation while the final eight essays consider Mary from diverse European points of