

In the Image of God, by David Brion Davis

reviewed by [Matthew Johnson](#) in the [November 6, 2002](#) issue

David Brion Davis is known for his scholarly *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* and *The Problem of Slavery and Western Culture*, both prizewinning texts. His latest effort, however, is a collection of book reviews and review essays. Anyone looking for an organized thematic exposition on the relationship between religion, moral values and our heritage of slavery--which the provocative title certainly suggests, and which Davis may well be capable of producing--will not find it here.

Davis's method is to offer careful analyses of the various works he examines--biographies of Reinhold Niebuhr and the historiography of Eugene Genovese, for example--and then use them at various points as springboards for moralizing and more general observations. He always leaves it to the reader, however, to fully connect the dots. The problem with this approach, particularly in such a vast and sensitive field, is that Davis's move from a particular text to general assessment seems more like a reactive counterpunch than a judgment about the issues that is guided by a coherent interpretive perspective. The method fails to do justice to a subject as important as the moral, religious and cultural implications of African-American slavery and American race relations.

A passage that illustrates how touchy this business can be appears in Davis's review of David J. Garrow's *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. Davis writes:

While King drew attention to intolerable conditions that were not being alleviated by the panacea of economic growth, he devised no effective program for fighting poverty. His rhetoric encouraged images of helpless victimization and national cataclysm. . . . One takes hope from the thought that King, and the movement he symbolized, did achieve revolutionary change, at least when measured by the goals and expectations of 1956 or even 1963.

They failed only to the extent that they assumed that an end to legal segregation would eliminate racial inequalities. They also failed to recognize that Americans historically have demanded that equality be defined in a way that does not inhibit ambition, effort, and achievement.

This last sentence, along with the earlier reference to encouraging "images of helpless victimization," not only seems uncomfortably close to reflecting the kind of presumptions African-Americans have struggled against for centuries, but, coming from a highly regarded historian, seem remarkably ahistorical. What observer of the civil rights movement in 1956, or 1963 for that matter, would have spoken of "images of helpless victimization?" Further, it was precisely the lack of a real historical tradition--not simply a definition--of equality, let alone any demand for it with respect to African-Americans, that precipitated the civil rights movement in the first place.

If Davis's statements are to be taken as interpretive generalizations, then one is left wanting to know more about his politics, especially in those instances when his views on racial matters seem scarcely discernable from those of neo-conservative commentators. Perhaps the disinterested long view of the scholar inevitably touch raw nerves within those who live with the legacy of slavery. But it can seem as though Davis shapes some of his material to circumvent white Americans' moral responsibility for the horror of slavery and the pain, suffering and centuries of retarded development imposed on African-Americans. At other times Davis seems to suggest detachedly that slavery is just another case in a long list of man's inhumanity to man, bad perhaps but no worse than what others have done.

Aside from the potentially irritating moral lessons, however, the collected pieces provide a valuable guide through the welter of literature on slavery and as an introduction to some of the fundamental questions and controversies that have shaped the field.