

Book Reviews

Sylvester A. Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500–2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 438pp. \$32.99. ISBN 978-0-5211-5770-1 (pbk)

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By engaging the broad scope of Black religions within and through an exploration of the emerging matrix of Western concepts such as modernity, national sovereignty and political economy, Sylvester Johnson's *African American Religions, 1500–2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* adds desperately needed layers of complexity to a historical purview regarding religious beliefs and practices throughout the African diaspora that have too often been reduced to stereotypes and sound bites even by its most ardent defenders for the cold comfort of conformity. In prose that is both lucid and lively, Johnson crafts both a solid hermeneutical framework as well as a compelling historical narrative that brings African American religious history in much closer alignment to Africana Studies in theoretical and methodological terms than these two fields have been in decades. Trapped in many regards by the confines of viewing Black religion and culture not simply in accordance with the mutually heteronormative and hegemonic standard of an elitist Eurocentric patriarchal homophobic Protestant Christian orthodoxy as well as a nearly inexorable adherence to the geopolitical boundaries of the United States as nation-state, so many dimensions of Black freedom and religious pluralism are greatly curtailed in both literal and figurative terms. The initial assertion that his book is going to be “a study of Black religion and its intersection with empire” (1) is a boldly audacious claim that Johnson accomplishes in grand fashion. With his lucid and provocative writing, Johnson provides an insightful historical analysis of a complex interplay of race, religion and colonial domination in the modern world during the historical epoch extending from the rise of the Age of Conquest to the advent of the Global War on Terror in our current era.

Throughout this text, Johnson does an exquisite job of breaking past those limitations in order to expand the discourse about and analysis of Black religion and culture in a truly impressive manner. For instance, the author's observation that “the colonial contacts and exchanges among Europeans, Native Americans, Africans, and Asians generated a particular imperial mode of parsing materiality to embolden ontological claims about religious and racial others” (83) is absolutely invaluable to understanding the ontology of empire in the modern world. His conjecture is that the relationship between religion and empire always has been more dialectical than diametric in their orientation if not actual origins. By tracing the evolution of African diasporic religions over the last half millennium, the author reveals a bitter paradox at the heart of the imperial project, namely the unilateral Manichean definition of humanity within Western thought by relentlessly and ruthlessly trading the immaterial for the material in service of White supremacy as a worldwide phenomenon. A prime example of this irony is evident in the author's discussion of the fetish in Atlantic

colonial discourses. While innumerable political treatises and religious tracts by Europeans condemned the thought of Africans imbuing material objects with sacred power, Western societies blindly and blithely ignored the fact that they had, in fact, made race vis-à-vis skin color and phenotypic traits a fetish of the highest order. Consequently, the world that has emerged over the five centuries covered in Johnson's book has witnessed the substitution of visions of the divine fueled by the experiential to conceptualizations of the human predicated by the potential for expropriation and ultimate exploitation. In this and numerous other ways, Johnson's book offers an excellent integration of the seemingly disparate historical perspectives found in Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religions* and Charles Long's *Significations*. Infused by the author's own inspired and independent treatment of African American religiosity, Johnson has done a great service to the field by bringing these two camps into more harmonious synergy through his provocative prose.

Whereas Johnson openly acknowledges and gladly embraces his intellectual indebtedness to venerable works of African American religious scholarship by the likes of Raboteau and Long, the academic treatise that most immediately comes to my mind as an appropriate analogue to this text is Paul Gilroy's landmark text *The Black Atlantic*. Although that book's titular phrase came to represent a discursive paradigm shift since its debut within cultural studies in general and Africana studies in particular, it is important to recall how little attention Gilroy himself gave to any aspect of Black religion either in traditional or modern articulations. To be honest, the original vision of the "Black Atlantic" as popularized by Gilroy's book of the same name lacked any serious insight into sacrality within its examinations of Black people's engagement with the global crisis of modernity. Thankfully, Johnson's work in *African American Religions, 1500–2000* serves not merely as a continuation of the diasporic and transnational perspective that Gilroy advanced but rather as a corrective to the myopia that much of Africana Studies arguably possesses towards religion writ large. Therefore, by recognizing that contestations about religion truly have had a role in the shaping of the modern world order, Johnson places it squarely among the constellation of structural forces that have brought the African diaspora into being.

Another interesting facet of the author's thesis lies in his argument that "internal colonialism" plays a key yet underappreciated role in how Black religion typically has been understood. What is particularly most fascinating about this premise might actually be an unintended consequence of Johnson's use of the term. Although a strict reading of internal colonialism as articulated by Foucault and subsequent postmodern theorists emphasizes the concept as a systemic power differential defined more by biopolitical than geopolitical means, the phrase is, in point of fact, more suggestive of deeper psychological and even phenomenological concerns that definitely warrant further investigation. By way of illustration, much of the author's perspectives on the insider-outsider conundrum embedded within the varieties of African American religious worldviews could have been augmented by engaging the work of postcolonial literature and criticism by the likes of Richard Wright, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, V. S. Naipaul, Jamaica Kincaid, Chinua Achebe, N'gugi Wa'Thiongo, and many others, in the hopes of expanding the range of viewpoints and voices brought to bear upon the book's core themes of colonialism, democracy and freedom. Whereas postcolonial thought in both its literary and scholarly formulations may not have discovered perfect answers to the questions of how to grapple with the aforementioned issues, the various writers and scholars working in this vein have refined a vast array of critical questions and cogent reflections that scholars of African American religions need to give serious consideration to in order to reach the broader vistas to which Johnson aspires. That concern notwithstanding, Johnson's *African American Religions, 1500–2000* is a work of great clarity, passion and power that deserves deep and fervent reading for years to come.

Bibliography

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- Rabotaeu, Albert. *Slave Religions: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Claudio Carvalhaes, ed., *Liturgy in Postcolonial Perspectives: Only One is Holy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 319pp. £65. ISBN 978-1-1375-1635-0 (hbk).

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Claudio Carvalhaes (Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago) has drawn together a highly stimulating and challenging collection of essays which explore new liturgical horizons in postcolonial contexts. In his introduction, Carvalhaes adumbrates the golden thread which links most of the contributions together, namely that postcolonial liturgical theologies (PLTs) are expressions of what Foucault has called the “insurrection of subjugated practices” (5). For Carvalhaes, PLTs seek to challenge and reconfigure the cultural uniformity and reified symbols and structures which have been imposed by colonial theology. Within the liturgies of colonial theology the notion that “only one is Holy” becomes not simply a description of an attribute of the Divine, but rather an attempt to construct theological homogeneity, which “excludes theological diversity and the multiplicities of the body of Christ” (13).

This overarching characterization of PLTs as articulating a multiplicity of voices on the margins, challenging an imposed universalism, is given further clarification by several further themes which, *inter alia*, seem of particular significance in the book. Firstly, PLTs are a challenge to the rationalism of western liturgical theology which has traditionally privileged the Apollonian (representing order, harmony and reason) over the Dionysian (representing joy, ecstasy and pleasure). This point is developed in Miriam Rosa’s analysis of African Brazilian Religion, in which she argues that “the first part of human formation is sensory” (108) and in which she critiques a Western approach to worship in which “joy was considered in opposition to seriousness” (109). The critique of western rationalism also gives rise to a second noteworthy theme in the book – embodiment. Thus, for example, Lilian Cheelo Siwila and Michael Jagessar seek to recover the centrality of the body in the context of the Eucharist, Julio Cesar Adam and Corky Alexander highlight the liturgical significance of pilgrimage and dance respectively and, in a highly original and provocative piece entitled “De-Evangelization of the Knees”, Nancy Cardoso Pereira challenges the construal of that particular part of the body as a mode of submission and shame.

A third important common concern here is to reconnect liturgy with social justice. Ann Hidalgo’s lucid exposition of two Catholic Mass settings from the Liberation Theology tradition in the late 1970s emphasizes how they “replace[d] canonical language with a language of liberation that names the particularities of people’s experience as they cry out for justice” (133), and also reflects a general concern in this volume to transcend the dualism which characterizes western liturgies (Herbert Moyo on liturgy and justice in Zimbabwe and C. I. David Joy on resistance and liturgy in India also make significant contributions in this regard). Fourthly, these studies underscore the connection between liturgy and identity, and