Reviews


Ain’t I a Womanist Too?: Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought is one of the latest contributions to the ongoing enterprise of womanist thought, a scholarly method that centers black women’s experiences, cultural artifacts, and scholarship as a way into liberative practice and thought. In this review, I intend to highlight many of the bright spots this collection offers, particularly the ways third-wave womanist religious thought distinguishes itself from first- and second-wave womanist religious thought, while also critically assessing the “ethical telos” in third-wave womanist religious thought.

The book is broken up into four parts: Religious Pluralism, Popular Culture, Gender and Sexuality, and Politics. Monica Coleman sets the tone for the collection, providing a helpful introduction that takes the reader through womanist genealogies beginning with Alice Walker’s work. Coleman also draws attention to Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems — black women scholars who were early progenitors of womanist thought and developed their own perspectives from the terms African Womanism and Africana Womanism. Coleman makes clear in her introduction that the first and second waves of womanist religious thought are alive and well, and that there is still much of value in their methods and interests. First-wave womanist religious thinkers are the forerunners of womanist religious thought, utilizing a methodology that takes black women’s experiences seriously as the starting place for their theology. Katie Cannon, Delores Williams, and Jacquelyn Grant are some of those who broke down the first barriers to womanist scholarship, unabashedly claiming black women’s place in religious studies. The second wave of womanist religious thought is an extension of these first thinkers, especially by deepening conceptions of theological doctrines and womanist ethics, while also putting in place normative frameworks and discourses. Without diminishing these contributions, Coleman positions third-wave religious thought as both an extension of the concerns of womanist religious thought and critique of the normative positions of the second wave, particularly when it comes to its lack of political engagement and the latent heteronormativity that is present in the work. Instead of being beholden to normative ideas about what, or who, makes a womanist, third-wave womanist religious thought attempts to trouble the neat ways womanist thought originally structured itself through essentializing claims about black women and who can be a womanist or do womanist work.

Part One: Religious Pluralism offers three essays from religious traditions outside of Christianity, a welcome addition given womanist religious thought’s predominantly Christian roots. Stephen Finley provides a fascinating look at liberative ideas of mothering through his profile of Mother Tynetta Muhammad, a matriarch in the Nation of Islam (NOI) whose creativity and innovation in the production of religious thought makes her a translator and interpreter of religious experiences and the Qur’an in the NOI. Debra Majeed takes up the issue of Muslim marriage, exploring polygyny and its relationship to black women’s social situation, especially the idea that there is a dearth of suitable black men with whom they might partner. Pu Xiumei also contributes here by highlighting the ecospiritual strands that run through Walker’s original articulation of womanism and her other works. Xiumei...
allows Walker’s work to guide her recovery of the Chinese goddess, Di Mu (whose closest English translation is “Earth Mother”).

Part Two: Popular Culture offers several engagements between womanist religious thought and literature, music, and the underground house scene. Darnise Martin’s stand-out essay “Is This a Dance Floor or a Revival Meeting?” is an especially intriguing look at gospel house music and its role in creating spaces of sociality for gay black men who have been ostracized from Christian churches and mainstream society in general. In her essay, “Confessions of an Ex-Theological Bitch,” Elonda Clay takes her cue from Karrine Steffans’s Confessions of a Video Vixen, and seeks to air the dirty laundry of womanist and black liberationist theology. Putting rape culture and respectability politics within those fields on blast, Clay seeks to develop a womanist theology that is not afraid of women exercising the power of their sexuality without fear of shaming or harassment. Ronald B. Neal rounds out this section with an essay on hip-hop and masculinity’s Abrahamic roots, challenging readers to rethink how gender, race, religion, and place affect masculinity, but the essay itself reads as more of a proposal than a paper.

The section on Gender and Sexuality spices things up quite a bit. Monica R. Miller boldly theorizes through the deviant materiality of the “Nappy Headed Ho,” refusing the shaming and policing of alternate black sexual and gender expressions that occurred in the wake of Don Imus’s statements about Rutgers’ women’s basketball team. Roger A. Sneed explores the liminality of black queer bodies using Octavia Butler and Meshell Ndegeocello’s work as interlocutors. In “Invisible Hands,” Nessette Falu examines black lesbians, and how their sexual desires influence and disrupt how they negotiate religion. E. L. Kornegay provides the closing essay in this section — a moving tribute to his mother and James Baldwin that intricately weaves the personal and theoretical together while seeking womanist ways of getting beyond heterosexuality.

The final section, Politics, attempts to articulate the “ethical telos” of third-wave womanist religious thought. Sharon D. Welch considers Patricia Hill Collins’s “visionary pragmatism” as a way of thinking through the work of political figures such as Nelson Mandela, Ron Dellums, and Barack Obama and developing methods for working towards change in policy and practice on local and national levels. Barbara A. Holmes also looks at the Obamas, taking Michelle Obama as an example of world making and “embodied creativity” that can respond to many of the political ills her husband’s presidency has failed to address. Vincent Anderson reflects on scholarly aesthetics and the role of the religious critic, arguing for an approach that creatively explores the “manifolds of manifestations and powers of presentation” in black experience. Arisika Razak closes the collection with her entry on embodiment and pedagogy, sharing how her own work as a teacher and women’s healthcare professional converge with a womanist ethic of liberatory wholeness.

From the contributions I’ve just described, it is clear that third-wave womanist thought takes seriously its critique of the normative frameworks of the second wave and is characterized by a diversity of interests and opinions. This breadth of viewpoints is what makes Ain’t I a Womanist Too a contribution that is both valuable and promising when it gets its wings, but also becomes weighted down by the amount of interests it tries to juggle. I applaud the efforts to show true inclusion and pluralism in thought, but I also found the volume wandering in places, while some essays seemed to end abruptly or just when their ideas were being developed more deeply. I was most confused by the final section on Politics, which seemed to be less radical politically than third-wave womanism’s rhetoric of liberation would suggest. Its liberatory politics seem to be in service to representational politics that is, in many ways, a liberal democratic vision of society. Thus the importance of showing diverse representations of black women, black people, and producing a religious thought that takes these diverse representations seriously is positioned as the “end” to which womanist liberationist rhetoric and practice are beholden. But then, we must seriously ask if this representational politics is capable of confronting and undoing the structures that make
misrepresentation so deadly in the first place? Those looking to womanism as a dynamic source for exploring the relationship between religion and culture in black women’s experiences will find much to interest them here. Those looking for how womanist thought might deepen liberationist thought and offer new ways of thinking about the myriad of political challenges facing black women and all people today will be a little less satisfied.

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Very rarely have I encountered an edited collection like this with such thoughtful, powerful, and careful contributions. In the opening chapter, Slee explains how each author roots their qualitative research in a desire to respect as “holy ground” the lives of women and girls; to value such lives as sacred places “where we expect to discern the presence and activity of the divine” (17). This volume lives up to these tall ambitions, not only speaking of the need to hear the faith lives of women and girls but also demonstrating practices of listening which do not rush too quickly toward coding and categorizing. Put crudely, this collection of essays practices what it preaches. What emerges in the end is a sense of a shared project — not just shared between the women involved in the research Symposium out of which this volume arises, but between the authors and their participants as they come to embody the research together.

In Part I, Slee establishes the tone for the remainder of the book, framing feminist qualitative research as a spiritual practice. Listening can be seen to function as prayer (18), transcribing as “a way of embodied, visceral listening” (20), handling transcripts as a handling of sacred texts (20–21), data analysis as an apophatic practice that confronts the researcher with their own unknowing (21–22), and writing up as a practice of proclamation (22–23), the kind that is intended towards transformation of the world rather than simply interpretation of it. This chapter presents qualitative methods as the very tools of research (and tools of faith) which stand to take feminist and practical theologies into new terrain. Reaching the end of this section, the reader can expect to feel a sense of anticipation and excitement about the possibilities a turn towards qualitative methods in feminist theology might produce.

Part II begins to witness faithfully to these possibilities, considering the neglected faith lives of girls, young women and older women. Abby Day’s discussion of the faith experiences of a cohort of Anglican women born in the 20s and 30s compellingly shows how these experiences challenge assumptions within the sociology of religion that faith is just about “belief”, that older women are more religious than younger women, and that women are more religious than men. Sarah-Jane Page uses her research into perceptions of feminism within two groups of Anglicans to show that while embracing gender equality, many women remained resistant to the “feminist” label. Postulating that this may be reflective of the way feminism continues to be vilified in contemporary culture she insightfully argues that the Church will need to go beyond “mere inclusion” if inequalities are to be addressed seriously. Her point seems especially pertinent given the recent ruling by the General Synod to admit women to the episcopate — a move which certainly signals greater levels of inclusion but which may not erase the “deeper-level inequalities” Page rightly speaks of.

Part III considers how the faith lives of women and girls are contextualized in different geographical and ecclesial contexts. Porter’s chapter is especially interesting, illuminating how women’s understanding of God informs their response to the “the troubles” in Northern Ireland. She concludes that for some Christian women, an in-the-middle God encourages them to occupy the space between difficult and even hostile groups in full knowledge that this