

Vincent W. Lloyd. *Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology.* Fordham University Press 2017. 304 pp. \$30.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780823277643).

Vincent Lloyd is a refreshingly interdisciplinary, challenging, and provocative thinker. On matters of race and black studies, and especially its intersection with French postmodernism, his words demand attention. Statements like: ‘Whiteness and secularism, conjoined, thoroughly shape reasoning, feeling and imagining. These ideologies have powerful immune systems, with well-established means of encountering and neutralizing the racial or religious other’ (236), call for unpacking (see below). His stimulating introductory chapter wants to awaken black theology and the black church through challenging secularism’s reach and reminding (or claiming) that ‘all theology, properly understood, is black theology’ (5). In truth, I wanted to like the work, even as I revolt against a Pope-Benedict like fear of the secular. When, in that same introduction, Lloyd remarks: ‘Rich people do not go to heaven, as the Bible so clearly says, and white people do not go to heaven – when whiteness is understood as comfort, privilege, and wealth. Whiteness can be renounced, and it must be renounced to do theology or to worship God,’ (7). I respond: Amen. I see Lloyd’s lyrical and potent challenge to white supremacy fitting (at times) comfortably in the ethos and prophetic language of seminal Black thinkers like MLK and James Baldwin, or a contemporary Black humanist like Ta-Nahesi Coates. Through separate chapters on the father of black theology, James Cone; or on Baldwin, one of my favorite writers, I thought my appreciation for the work would only grow.

Whenever I am not persuaded by a heralded book (M. Shawn Copeland, for example, provides one of the cover blurbs) on interesting topics (and which has received favorable reviews; for example, deemed an ‘intellectual tour de force’ in the AAR’s *Reading Religion* site (<http://readingreligion.org/books/religion-field-negro>), I look inward and blame myself. I must have missed something, am beset by ignorance, or not intellectually sophisticated enough to wade through some of the dense jargon or French theorists. This is all probably true, but the real reason is both more superficial and valid, but I’ll return to why I struggle to embrace this work further below. Let me first give a brief overview of *Religion of the Field Negro*.

Only the Introduction and the Coda were not previously published, and these essays, not incidentally, are the most powerful in the book. It is in the introduction that Lloyd gets the book’s title, seeking to distinguish the religion of the house slave (aligned with the master) and the religion of the field Negro, with only the latter the real religion, rooted in daily struggle, oppression, truth, and the seeking of liberty. It is the religion of the field Negro, worshipping a God on the side of the slave, the outcast and outlier that has Lloyd claiming that all real theology is black theology. As a liberation theologian, I am partial to this line of thought: of a God of love incarnate and in solidarity with the lost and broken of this world; and in general, such outcasts, such broken bodies, have been black. Here, I would also stress more nuancing is needed: I hear the Native American, echoing Chief Seattle, challenge such a color adjective as hegemonic and limited, so, too the indigenous voices of the Americas, often labelled Brown—not to mention those of so-called white skin, but deeply discriminated against for various reasons (economic level, so-called education level, gender, sexual preference, disabilities of one kind or another). Is all theology really black theology, in the literal, embodied sense? Must ‘black’ represent all the other kinds of discrimination, in a hierarchy of injustice and racial and ethnic abuse and oppression? As someone of Irish descent, perhaps I should also mention the infamous ‘No Irish Need Apply?’ Such is not to undermine the moral and social justice thrust behind black theology claims, and maybe it is better to simply cite Lloyd’s argument with a comment about *primus inter pares*. With the rise of white supremacism and Trumpian anti-black

arrogance, I—who identify my ethnicity on forms as Caucasian—have no problem with Lloyd’s stance. But consider how the American Indian scholar, Tink Tinker, has rightly expressed his disagreement to claims that seem to undermine or subsume the genocide committed against indigenous and native peoples.

In my marginalia comments after reading the introduction, I expressed concerns about ambiguity in the text regarding Malcolm X’s advocacy of violence (note I am not challenging the need to protect yourself when the State’s juridical and police force were anti-black); the stark black superiority to (so-called) whiteness; and wondered about the role of humility in such a black theology that claims supremacy. I wondered further if the means and ends are conflicted. In the book’s Coda, Lloyd does write: ‘we must humble ourselves’ (235) but such a wise injunction is not linked with the claims above, so the question remains. I was also perplexed by the Coda’s praise of obedience to tradition and authority as a way of advancing justice (235). Writing from ground zero of the Catholic Church’s sexual abuse crisis (Dublin), I would argue the opposite.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section, deemed ‘Cornerstones,’ has chapters on James Cone, Baldwin, Cameroonian scholar Joseph-Achille Mbembe, and then one on Derrida, Agamben, and Sylvia Wynter. Section Two, ‘Questions,’ also has four chapters, asking: What is Black Tradition? What is Black Organizing? and What are Blacks and Whites to Hope? The third part, ‘Exempla,’ has chapters on Steve Biko (the anti-apartheid leader from South Africa), Huey P. Newton (co-founder of the Black Panthers), Barack Obama, and philosopher Gillian Rose. Rose was the focus of Lloyd’s doctoral dissertation, and I was moved by his seeing Rose’s “not Jewish or Christian enough” label resonate with his own perception once of being too black to be white, and too white to be black (217). It’s another vibrant example of Lloyd not only tackling a challenging thinker (focusing on identity politics, and more mysteriously, the ‘Race of the Soul’), but exposing his own visage and frailty.

I have thought long and hard about why Lloyd didn’t try to unify these chapters. He does write his aim is intentionally not systematic but examining, through various figures, how they ‘challenge secularism and the ways in which secularism distorts’ (12). For Lloyd, ‘Secularism is the exclusion or management of the theological’ (9). It is an ‘aberration’ (5)—an example he gives is banning prayer in school.

As noted, the chapters were all previously published, but there is little of the updating and cross-pollinating one would have hoped to give the book more coherence and unity, beyond the fact that black thinkers and words like ‘race’ are discussed. For example, the chapter on Barack Obama, examining what Lloyd calls a postracial saint, studies Obama’s relationship with Pastor Jeremiah Wright and Obama’s famous speech on race after the fury reported in the media. Surprisingly, Lloyd doesn’t critique Obama’s distancing from Wright. My sense (as an American) of American History is rooted in Howard Zinn, just as my identity as a Catholic is post-Holocaust and so deeply aware of the anti-Judaic tendencies in my faith’s tradition, so I found much of Wright’s anger justified, if not ho-hum; and viewed Obama’s response as rhetorically elegant political pandering. But when Lloyd mentions how Obama’s speech challenged Wright’s claim regarding the ‘racism of most Whites,’ (213), it seemed an obvious coda was to turn to the post-Obama context of Trumpian America, particularly of Charlottesville, but no such update followed.

In the Notes, the chapter is cited as originally appearing in one of Lloyd’s edited books from 2014, *Sainthood and Race*. (*Religion of the Field Negro* was published in 2017.) Another example is when discussing Gillian Rose. Lloyd compares her views on race with Anne Chang, writing, ‘For Cheng, in contrast, anti-black and anti-immigration racism is intertwined with the history of American society as a whole’ (228). I immediately think of Baldwin, especially his *The Evidence of*

Things Not Seen. Now to be fair, Lloyd's chapter on Baldwin is a close, complex reading of his fiction and non-fiction essays. His analysis enhanced my own reading, though I don't identify Baldwin as Christian and believe that Baldwin's paean to a post-racial love is pure generosity and acceptance, beyond judgment, which Lloyd doesn't seem to accept or deem possible (13). Instead, Lloyd sees any secular turn or embrace as inefficient and ultimately self-defeating for those religious, especially black people and the black church. My point, though, is Lloyd doesn't mention Baldwin here and so make a connection with his earlier chapter on Baldwin. This is because this work is basically a separate collection of challenging, often illuminating, but frustratingly ambiguous essays on race, religion, and the secular. It has a clever title, provocative introduction, and an inspiring coda on how the black church is alive and well, challenging white supremacy through the lives of the poor and black folk—but no strong, coherent threads tying each essay to the other, one section to the next. If you do not seek such unity, then perhaps reading Lloyd's collection here will be more fruitful; however, why and how he opposes the secular remains both unclear and unsatisfying.

The secular seems enmeshed in whiteness and so everything wrong with the world; but writing as a theologian, I don't see the so-called religious as necessarily better (for one hopeful moment of the secular, see 149: 'To be clear, I am not arguing that all secular hopes are idolatrous'). The 'religious' is Dorothy Day and lovingly pluralist Sufis, but also inquisitions and a biblical fundamentalism that slanders reason, science, and a God who loves all. I can accept Lloyd's White/Black Manicheanism because I agree with the basic premise in how claims of white exceptionalism have reaped misery and destruction in our world, but the same cannot be said of the secular/religious binary, especially if one thinks of race. Remember, it was primarily Muslim and Christian slaveholders who were instrumental in that abominable trade, and blaming the secular would be another way of avoiding the reflection in the mirror.

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