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Book Review: Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations in Black America

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fascinating 19th-century instances of a variety of anorexia closely linked to distinctive religious beliefs. Obviously I remain unconvinced by the argument, but R. offers us complex and interesting questions about the relationship between religion and health, and we can learn from them even if we find his answers too imprecise.

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CONJURING CULTURE: BIBLICAL FORMATIONS OF BLACK AMERICA. RELIGION IN AMERICA. By Theophus H. Smith. New York: Oxford University, 1994. Pp. xvi + 287. \$32.

This revised dissertation is bold and original in conceptualization, thoroughly researched, and written with great passion. Showing a creative lack of respect for disciplinary boundaries, Smith draws deeply and creatively upon American, especially African American, religious history, folklore and musicology, aesthetics, literary criticism and critical theory, history and phenomenology of religion, and biblical hermeneutics in order to produce a brilliant and sophisticated interpretation of the construction of the worldview that can be associated with a significant segment of African Americans. This worldview is argued to have been effected through the engagement of the Bible as a "conjure book," a "kind of magical formulary for prescribing cures and curses, and for invoking extraordinary powers in order to reenvision, revise, and transform the conditions of human existence" (6).

Influenced by N. Frye's *The Great Code*, in which the Bible is viewed as "a source of representation and of cultural meaning in Western civilization and history" (6), S. organized his book around a total of nine parts of the Bible—Genesis [cosmogony], Exodus [conjuring-God-for-freedom], Law [curing violence I], Spirituals [psalms; aesthetics], Wisdom [proverbs, worldview], Prophecy [oracles; vocation]; and Gospel [curing violence II], Praxis [acts/activism], and Apocalypse [judgment; revelation]. These parts correspond to "typological codes" that African Americans used to "conjure culture." With such codes S. understands himself to be engaging in the analysis of what W. Sollors called "typological ethnogenesis," the formation of peoplehood through . . . biblical typology." The nine parts are divided into three overarching rubrics which allow S. to analyze the practice of "typological ethnogenesis" from three different perspectives: ethnographic (Genesis, Exodus, and Law), theoretical (Spirituals, Wisdom, and Prophecy), and theological (Gospel, Praxis, and Apocalypse). A concluding parenetic section argues that African Americans are "coparticipants" in a contemporary worldwide configuration of diasporan peoples seeking solidarity. As such, they are called upon to help transform the world through the "optimal" balancing of relationships and structures that is fundamental to "conjugalional culture."

With its focus upon the concept of "conjure" the book models a type of religious or theological studies that breaks away from focus upon texts, institutions, and great personalities, as well as the confining

discursive formations of systematic theology. The employment of the concept of "conjure," with its multidisciplinary foci, leads to different ways of schematizing religion. For this contribution alone all students of religion are in S.'s debt.

Yet in the tradition of original and brilliant works, the book raises more questions than it answers, highlights more problems than it solves. The lack of consistent diachronic analysis gives the impression that African Americans' conjuring efforts were fairly limited in range, the attention given to the different typological codings associated with the different canonical text-parts notwithstanding. How are the diversity and dynamism of African Americans' conjuring efforts to be comprehensively registered? Is it enough to argue that the biblical conjuring efforts can occur "partially, proleptically, or retrogressively" at any time in African American history? To be sure, this points to a degree of dynamism and fluidity, but insofar as it limits the conjuring efforts to the (western defined) Bible, conjure-culture efforts among African Americans nevertheless cannot be comprehensively described or accounted for.

What, e.g., happens to S.'s nine-part schema when the "sects" and "cults" in African American religious and cultural history that conjure culture with texts *outside* the "canon" are added? Should it be assumed that only "canonical" texts have been engaged? What are the wider sociopolitical, aesthetic, and other implications of the biblical-canonical circumscription of conjuring efforts? And how can the exclusion of the letters of "Paul" from an analysis of African American conjuring be justified? What becomes of the schema when the widely recognized history of controversial engagements of the letters among African Americans are figured into the schema?

S.'s argument about the perduring legacy of biblical conjuring efforts among African Americans is very persuasive. Less persuasive is his argument that this legacy has been mostly liberating. Even less persuasive is his argument that as it points to "possibilities for transcendence," conjuring requires "theological . . . figural reading" (254), so as to help African Americans avoid being absorbed by the biblical text or falling into ideological rigidity or sedimentation. This undeveloped reference to "theological reading" as solution is odd, more a statement of hope, I think, than argumentation. Such readings have rarely functioned in the way that Smith suggests they might. History suggests that they have contributed to the very sedimentation of which S. speaks with horror.

This is a learned and provocative work precisely because it raises so many questions that get at the heart of the challenges in the study of religion and culture. That it does not answer all the questions it raises is far less important than that it calls the reader into the conversation on different terms. It is must reading for all serious students of religion.

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