



PROJECT MUSE®

Black Religion: Malcolm X, Julius Lester, and Jan Willis
(review)

Eddie S. Glaude Jr.

American Journal of Theology & Philosophy, Volume 31, Number 1,
January 2010, pp. 77-79 (Review)

Published by University of Illinois Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ajt.0.0018>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/383442>

Anderson challenges the concepts of “home” and “the black church” as *the* centers of value for African American religious experience. He tells intensely personal narratives of how violence interrupts African Americans homes, and how sexual and gender politics render black churches oppressive for many African Americans. This section rings a tragic note as the reader sees how some particularities of lived experience not only diminish our humanity, but also negate some of the most central assertions of black religious studies.

Anderson’s optimism emerges in his concept of “Beloved Community.” Beloved Community occurs in “the concrete actualization of creative exchange with the past, present and future of Christian faith in community” (viii). When we are able to enlarge ourselves beyond the particularities that usually bind us, and live our transcendence, justice and goods in this world of finitude, Beloved Community is present. It is a kind of eschatology. It is the regulative ideal *and* actual events. Because Beloved Community *can* erupt, even in the midst of narratives like those Anderson recounts, he can still name “home” and “black church” as centers of value for African American religious experience. Thankfully, in Anderson’s estimation, there are many other centers of value as well.

In sum, Anderson’s work is a needed and insightful contribution to the fields of liberal theology, philosophy of religion, black theology, and African American religious studies. He deftly weaves together voices that are rarely heard in the same chorus. For those familiar with Anderson’s work, this is the book we have long anticipated. He brings to one volume the critiques of *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, the theoretical groundings of *Pragmatic Theology*, his essay commentaries on sexuality in black religious communities, and concrete narratives from his personal experiences. *Creative Exchange* is a poignant read that will win over its readers to a commitment to “the grotesque” in every academic and personal rendering.

Black Religion: Malcolm X, Julius Lester, and Jan Willis. William David Hart. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 244 pp. \$74.95 cloth. (Reviewed by Ed-die S. Glaude, Jr., Princeton University)

Stories, whether we admit it or not, are central to what we do as scholars. The kinds of stories we tell ourselves about our labor in the archives or about the manic and, admittedly lonely, task of writing inform how we take up a particular subject and reflect, in part, the habits that orient us to our work. These stories are personal, intimate accounts of our strengths and insecurities; they indicate the gravity of interests that pull us in a certain direction

as opposed to another. Of course, more general stories inform the academic disciplines we inhabit; they are not reducible to autobiography. These stories frame problems, chart trajectories, and define the boundaries of what matters and what does not. Every now and then an iconoclastic, and deeply personal voice, breaks through to challenge dominant stories within a field. I believe William Hart's latest book, *Black Religion: Malcolm X, Julius Lester, and Jan Willis*, does exactly that.

Hart aims to disrupt the standard narrative informing much of the scholarship in African American religious studies. That narrative too often presumes that "religion is the essence, genius, or soul of black folk; that slavery, Jim Crow, and Christianity transformed this religion of African origin into the religion of Afro-Americans; that 'the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy' reveal the distinctive characteristics of Black Religion; that the Black Church is the most important institution and social center in the black community, and that the church teeters between resistance to white supremacy and submission . . ." (9). Hart does not reject this account out of hand. He simply seeks to scale back its scope and to open space for the variety of African American religious expression. When *Black Religion* (and the capital letters are his) is seen as the essence of black folk and the black church as their most important institution, Hart suggests, the complexity of black religious life is too often flattened as an unexamined Christian bias—Protestant to be even more exact—determines what black religion is and what our study of it ought to entail.

Hart will have none of this. He baldly presents a study of figures that do not conform to the standard narrative—individuals who are what he calls *Afro-eccentric*. Afro-eccentricity marks the difference that always resides in the same; it is an explicit rejection of racial essentialism, a critical pun that, at once, announces the folly of certain political gestures around blackness and relishes in those "ways of being black that are 'off-center,' 'off-color,' and outside the statistical if not the axiological norm" (x). Such an approach foregrounds the production of religious *others* and gives specific attention to what they, as *others*, do and say and believe. As such, Hart develops his argument about Black Religion through the religious autobiographies of Malcolm X, Julius Lester, and Jan Willis, not so much representative but exemplary religious others, who struggle with religious belief, personal identity formation, and black political struggle. Each brings into view an aspect of African American religious life obscured by a singular focus on the black church: Malcolm X turns us toward Islam, Julius Lester to Judaism, and Jan Willis towards Buddhism.

The chapters on Malcolm X's spiritual journey frame Hart's subsequent engagement with Lester and Willis in the sense that, like Malcolm, both attempt to negotiate their Christian heritage in light of their understanding of

white supremacy and their felt sense of racial solidarity. Hart develops a useful, if not provocative, typology to interpret Malcolm's transformation from petty hustler to spiritual and political icon. *Jahiliyyah* (ignorance) and *Jihad* (struggle) and *Hijrah* (emigration) and *Hajj* (pilgrimage) are deployed here not only to signal the limitations of categories within African American religious studies, they are also aimed at certain standing assumptions within Islamic studies. The same holds for his use of *Teshuvah* and *Dukkha* in his discussion of Lester and Willis respectively. Indeed, Hart revels in being an iconoclast. The result is an interesting, if at times uneven, account of Malcolm X's and his purported children's spiritual journey. One might quibble with Hart's more speculative, psychoanalytic claims about Malcolm, Lester, and Willis (and with the failures of his copy editor!), but such disagreement would obscure the real purpose of his engagement with these figures. They are *examples* in the service of a broader claim about African American religion—examples that hope to persuade, cajole, unsettle as well as disrupt a certain kind of performance of objectivity about such “messy” matters as religion.

Hart writes that “Black Religion is a consequent not an antecedent reality, an artifact not an essence” (11). He holds this view in light of his other pragmatic and naturalist commitments about religion more generally understood. For him, “religion is adverbial” (201); it is a conceptual tool that aids us in our efforts to make sense of the mystery of life and the inevitability of death. The gods are our creations; they are, in the end, simply *us*. As Hart writes: “We create gods just as surely as birds build nests, bees make honey, and spiders spin webs of beauty and death. Adaptation, beauty, and death: my philosophy of religion in a nutshell” (202). We are, after all, artists creating and recreating lives in the contexts of a world that demands much; religion happens to be one of our favorite broad brushes—hence the significance of stories, personal or otherwise.

Black Religion is about much more than the general story that frames and limits African American religious studies. To be sure, Hart has made a significant contribution in this regard. But the book, in its very form, reaches for much more. The autobiographies carry the argument, because, at a basic level, the book *is* autobiographical. *Black Religion* seeks to make room for its afro-eccentric author. Hart writes for himself and, in doing so, he provides space for those who revel in the mysteries of life and who find grace and power in the extraordinary doings of ordinary people. As for scholars of African American religion, ours is a kind of collateral benefit—a field loosened from the constraints of an old story.