

**Josef Sorett, *Black is a Church: Christianity and the Contours of African American Life*,
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The monograph *Black is a Church* by Josef Sorett – an American scholar of religion and race who is currently Dean of Columbia College of Columbia University – explores and reveals the ways in which the culture and identity of American blacks has been influenced and even shaped by Protestantism. The author discusses Afro-Protestantism and reveals that Protestant Christianity played an elemental role in the emergence of black literary creativity, shaping its unique identity that has permeated its way to its current form.

The history of Afro-Protestantism shows the obvious links between literature, politics and religion, especially in the late 19th century. In the book, the author looks at historical, sociological and anthropological work in the 1930s and 1940s that was crucial to the study of African American culture and continues the historical cross-section further into the present day, repeatedly considering concepts such as ‘black church’ and ‘black religion’. In general, the author argues that Black Studies has adopted a secular orthodoxy in which the analytical category of religion remains under-theorized. According to Sorett, Black Studies would certainly benefit from a rethinking of secularist assumptions, since Afro-Protestantism has long formed the very core of the tradition of Black Studies theory and practice. He treats the subject in the 239 pages of this readable monograph.

The monograph is organized into four comprehensive chapters. The first chapter, entitled ‘The Literary Beginnings of Afro-Protestantism’, explores the narratives of black slaves in a very interesting way, authentically introducing the reader to the topic presented. Through this narrative, enslaved Africans attempted to interpret the new world and settle into it. According to Sorett, the authors and the communities around them authorized a tradition of Protestantism that was something specifically black but also specifically American. The slave narratives drew the contours for a set of practices that would then define the tradition of politically engaged Afro-Protestantism in the United States. They also provided the space and platform for the emergence of ideas that gave rise to the terms ‘black church’ and ‘black religion’, the author writes. The first chapter of the monograph reveals the ways in which Afro-Protestant

orthodoxy was integrated into the fabric of black subjectivity and social life in the United States.

The second comprehensive chapter, 'Afro-Protestantism, Pluralism, and the Problem of the Color Line', examines the elemental role of Afro-Protestantism in the emergence of the genre of so-called race literature. In this chapter, the author also examines the role of Afro-Protestantism in the religious pluralism that permeated the new forms of Christianity that gave rise to Afro-Pentecostalism. The phenomena described here provided something of a platform through which African Americans could interpret and organize an increasingly heterodox black religious experience at the turn of the twentieth century. Black preachers and writers at the time, according to Sorett, aspired to a more complex form of religious expression. It also moved to delineate disciplinary boundaries and key concepts through which African American religion was represented and analyzed in the decades that followed.

The author titles the third chapter 'Afro-Protestantism and the Politics of Studying Black Life' and focuses on the period from the 1930s to the 1940s. It was then that race literature expanded beyond the existing Afro-Protestant paradigms and significantly influenced the academic and activist work of a new generation in the United States. In this chapter, the author looks at, among other things, a specific kind of religious orthodoxy that was consistent with the politics of racial authenticity and set certain conditions for the study of the black church and black religion in a broader context. In chapter three, the author also highlights other important writers and thinkers who influenced and shaped the religious life of American blacks. These writers also adhered to institutional and ethical Afro-Protestantism. Sorett presents their important works that were instrumental in the further development of the issues under study.

In the final fourth chapter, 'The Afterlives of Afro-Protestantism', the author discusses three more recent examples of Afro-Protestant modernity involving scholarship, literature, and politics. The chapter affirms the enduring power of religious and racial logic calling for the de-centering of the church, which became newly evident during the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. According to Sorett, attempts to decenter Afro-Protestantism, descriptive accounts of its decline, and polemics about its demise have often served as the very conditions of possibility for its persistence and rediscovery.

Josef Sorett's book is certainly a rewarding read not only for those interested in Black Studies in the context of religion, but certainly for cultural anthropologists, theologians, and religious studies scholars as well.

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