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Josef Sorett, *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics*

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The “worship of spirit,” renowned black author Amiri Baraka once wrote, “is always at
the root in Black art...or at least the summoning of or by such force” (181). That this
remained true even as the black communities in the US that produced such art were tied
to the sweeping powers of both secularization and Americanization is essentially what
Josef Sorett, Associate Professor of Religion and African American Studies at Columbia
University, sets out to demonstrate in his first book, *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of
Racial Aesthetics*. Combining his main interests in religious history and African-American
literature, Sorett aims to illuminate the complex mix of ‘the spirit’ and the politics of
black identity at play in the work of many of the most celebrated black authors and
intellectuals from the Harlem Renaissance through the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s
and 1970s. The result is a rich resource for scholars of religion, secularism, literature,
American history, and Black Studies alike, with numerous new and valuable insights
pertaining to the role that religion directly or indirectly has played in the development
and articulation of a distinct Afro-Protestant modernity in 20th century America.

Sorett’s objectives in *Spirit in the Dark* are as intriguing as they are ambitious. Several
overarching and overlapping goals drive his investigation into the intersections of race,
religion, and the arts. Its most straightforward purpose is presenting a historical
overview of the ways in which ideas of “spirituality” influenced a broad variety of literary
and sociological works by predominantly Northern-based black artists and intellectuals in
the 20th century, even though many of those black cultural expressions are often deemed
as secular (by readers, scholars, or even the authors themselves) or represent contesting
views on the role of religion, Christianity, and the Black Church in the African-American
experience (xi). By arguing that there was a continuity in the presence of religiosity in
the modern black arts across time and space, he accordingly deduces how what he calls a
genealogy of ‘the spirit’ (10) has helped create a distinctive ‘racial aesthetic’ (that is, a
tradition of black cultural expressions that inform and illuminate the meaning of
blackness in America) rooted in Afro-Protestantism. This changes our understanding of
African-American modernity as being secular in nature, Sorett believes. What is more, he
states, “modern black life—even under the sign of the secular—has continued to adhere to
the logics of a familiar Protestantism and, in this way, is quintessentially American” (xii).

To make this argument convincing, Sorett urges us to redefine what we see as “modern,”
“sacred,” and “secular” and what is understood as “religion” and what as “spirituality.”
Nominally secular black writers have often invoked “the spirit”—particularly a real or
imagined “black spirit”—as opposed to “the church” in animating their works, to loosen
the central grip Afro-Protestant discourse has had on black culture. After all, “the
church” as an institution and Christianity as an ideology have had a detrimental effect on
the black community—from their roles in generating and maintaining an oppressive
global system of white supremacy to enabling charlatans to prey off the vulnerable—even
as they were also used as a source of strength to cultivate social activism. Yet, Sorett
argues, regardless of whether authors intended or even realized it, such secular
evocations of “the spirit” were nonetheless often fostered within the framework,
discourse, and animus of Afro-Protestantism, thereby nullifying distinctions between the
Black Church and other independent activist black institutions (7, 217). Accordingly, he
claims, “the very organizing logics, aesthetic practices, and political aspirations of the
African American literary tradition have been decidedly religious. In short, black
literature is religious. Better yet, it is an extension of the practice of Afro-Protestant
Christianity” (2).

This is not to affirm the stereotype of all blacks being “naturally religious” (and thus,
backward or primitive as opposed to ‘modern’), however; it is rather to showcase the
widespread, fluid and dynamic usage and endurance of religious images, ideas, and
spiritual sensibilities in black culture and politics, even as those cultural and political
expressions were construed outside the context of the Black church and (Afro-)Protestant
theologies. As such, he illustrates how for instance Aretha Franklin’s gospel songs being
performed in night clubs and black author Nancy Cunard’s spiritual experiences in
church as having “nothing to do with God, but with life—a collective life for which I know
no name” (62) can be seen as two sides of the same coin, making his central claim of Afro-
Modernity as being not necessarily “performed in church, but [still being] very much of
the church” (xii) persuasive.

Spirit in the Dark accordingly constitutes a “history of ideas” aimed at creating a
theoretical “grand metanarrative” that takes precedence over a purely historical or
biographical approach to black literary figures and their works (6, 14), even though the
chapters cover chronological historical periods. Instead, each chapter is an attempt to
unravel the “spiritual grammar” black authors and intellectuals employed, debated, and
challenged to create a modern black culture at specific moments in time. Because of
Sorett’s interest in writing this religious meta-history, however, artists’ theorizing on
black culture, as expressed in among others essays and anthologies, are mostly
prioritized over analyses of their literary work (novels, poems, plays, etc.).

The first two chapters are devoted to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1910s and 1920s, a
time when more commercial avenues for black writers were beginning to open up and
black religious experience became increasingly fluid, multiethnic and polycultural as a
result of the Great Migration. The first chapter sets out the theoretical framework—of ‘church’ and ‘spirit’ working in tandem to advance a comprehensive vision of blackness—that guides the rest of the chapters. This is done through an analysis of the first “concerted effort to forge a decidedly modern religious sensibility” (25) that emerged in response to these new social contexts by both New Negro clergy like Reverend Reverdy Ransom and more secular members of the New Negro Movement like Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois, and George Schuyler. The second chapter zooms in on the ways in which the work and cultural theories of authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, Richard Wright, and Nancy Cunard furthered the makings of a modern black aesthetic and culture in the 1930s. By enlisting the ‘ancestral spirits’ of the African, Caribbean, and Southern past and folklore—which both challenged and incorporated a ‘white and Western’ dominant Christian tradition—in their work (an endeavor that often took the form of a spiritual quest in and of itself), such authors recast US black culture and religion as a hybrid, New World (and thus, ‘modern’ and distinctive) phenomenon.

The analysis of among others Claude McKay, Roi Ottley, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, and Ann Petry in chapters three and four, however, shows how a number of black artists in the 1940s and 1950s challenged this idea of a distinctive black culture. Instead they embraced—and actively helped to create—a new narrative that emphasized the universality of black culture. This idea of universality, which Sorett calls “racial catholicity,” became more and more acceptable due to the (post-)World War II context, he argues. A small but noticeable number of African Americans, including writers like McKay, increasingly joined Catholic churches in northern cities, and used Catholicism as a means to make a claim for universality. The new opportunities for civil rights efforts in American society further legitimized the deemphasis of cultural distinctiveness to foster social inclusion. As the degree of sociological impact increasingly determined the reception of black literature, black artists in their work and theories of black culture then remade Afro-Protestantism into a quintessentially American civil religion as a tool to advance integration and civil rights.

But in the 1960s this universal reading of black culture increasingly clashed with the realities of a post-colonial world that celebrated cultural distinctiveness and critiqued the Christian incentives that had driven the imperialist conquests of the non-white world. As chapters five and six illustrate, black authors, predominantly those related to the Black Arts Movement like Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, and Toni Cade-Bambara, therefore continued to use religious sensibilities (including an openness to Islam and African-derived religious practices) and appeals to both a real and imagined ‘racial spirit’ (that often elevated blackness in itself as having spiritual significance) as a means to create a racial aesthetic that conformed to the political goals of Black Power. Sorett then ends his overview by outlining how authors like Ishmael Reed, Alice Walker, Albert Murry, and others in the Black Arts Movement who protested Black Power’s masculinist and nationalist assumptions likewise found a useful tool in religion to make their case for the politics of black culture.

Sorett’s totalizing and at times abstract approach to his topic may offer some pitfalls. Apart from the risk of overemphasizing continuities over discontinuities that comes with writing historical overviews, not focusing on the authors’ biographies for example allows for the circumvention of complex debates on the origins of ideas and the work that ensued (Baraka’s anti-Semitism comes to mind). But its benefits outweigh its
shortcomings. This framework is especially useful for understanding the ways in which region, class, and particularly generational conflicts have influenced black expressions of 'spirituality.' Moreover, the richness of primary sources and the breadth of authors investigated make Sorett’s case for the endurance and significance of religion in modern black culture convincing. Of special interest are the sections on Claude McKay and the “spiritualized masculinity” visible in the Black Arts Movement. Because of the centrality of Harlem-based black authors and intellectuals, the book additionally adds fresh dimensions to more historical works detailing the black freedom struggle in the North and New York in particular, like those by Cheryl Greenberg and Thomas Sugrue. But Sorett most of all succeeds in his goal of presenting the pervasiveness of religious sensibilities in presumably secular black cultural expressions, and thereby effectively expands the discussion of religion in the modern black arts beyond the realm of music. As such, his contribution to the fields of (African-)American religion, secularism, literature, and culture is original and necessary, and serves as a lasting testimony to the 'spirited' nature of black modernist art - in all senses of the word.