

Swarthmore College

Works

Religion Faculty Works

Religion

12-1-2005

Review Of "James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope And Crisis In Black Holiness Culture" By C.E. Hardy III

Yvonne Patricia Chireau
Swarthmore College, ychirea1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Yvonne Patricia Chireau. (2005). "Review Of "James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope And Crisis In Black Holiness Culture" By C.E. Hardy III". *Church History*. Volume 74, Issue 4. 883-884. DOI: 10.1017/S0009640700101210
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion/3>

An [accessible version](#) of this publication has been made available courtesy of Swarthmore College Libraries. For further accessibility assistance, please contact openaccess@swarthmore.edu with the title or URL of any relevant works.

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

understanding of a leading black leader whose project to “elevate the race” illuminates the varied approaches that black Americans adopted to address the problem of race and racial oppression in American society.

Curtis J. Evans
Harvard University

James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture. By **Clarence E. Hardy III.** Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003. xvi + 150 pp. \$30.00 cloth.

Clarence Hardy III has written an extremely thoughtful study of African American religion as witnessed in the writings of one of America's most ardent social critics, the late James Baldwin. Baldwin's complex relationship to black holiness culture is the vehicle for asking questions that are concerned with oppression, identity, sexuality, and the body as they relate to black Christianity. Although it is one of the largest and most vibrant branches of black Protestantism, theologians and historians know woefully little about the religious world of black holiness, a sectarian wing of Christian revivalism that emerged in the late nineteenth century, partially in response to a diminishing folk religiosity and partially in response to a new emphasis on the social gospel and ideologies of respectability that prevailed in many mainline churches. With its emphasis upon the proximity of the divine in every aspect of a believer's life, the necessity for an experiential, ritualized conversion, and its promotion of a staunch, moralistic piety, the black holiness tradition preserved the purest impulses of Christian evangelicalism as it posited the reality of a just and judgmental God—albeit for Baldwin, one who remained silent and passive in the face of black suffering. Baldwin was the quintessential participant-observer in this world, striving to make sense of his own connection to African American Christianity while confronting its limitations within his own life and in the lives of his characters. Rather than abandoning religious belief, Baldwin explored the contradictions of the tradition in which he was raised, examining through his fictional and nonfictional writings the dynamic and often painful struggle that has historically characterized the African American quest for spiritual meaning.

Hardy's analysis of Baldwin and Christianity is as comprehensive as it is multifaceted. Theologians, literary critics, and religious studies scholars will find the book to be very much informed by his sensitivity to multiple methodological insights. Hardy borrows his initial interpretive framework from Theophus Smith's transdisciplinary notion of “conjuring culture,” which provides a structure for examining conversion and sacred performances such as dance, preaching, and religious ecstasy as social, historical, and cultural practices that are also vital themes in Baldwin's work. Hardy maintains that twentieth-century holiness is “a specific expression of this conjuring culture found in the urban environs of the United States as the principal carrier of the evangelical impulse in black religion” (xiv). He supports this idea by placing Baldwin's representations of black spirituality in the context of the greater symbolic universe in which Christian evangelicalism functions, looking closely at his literary engagement with an insular religious culture wherein “the immediacy of sacred presence, one's personal confrontation with the texture and truth of biblical themes, and the sure reality of divine judgment all place a claim on the human imagination” (xiv).

James Baldwin's writings paralleled significant developments and shifts in his personal life as well as important moments in American life and history, such as the civil rights and black freedom movements. They also chart an evolving spiritual biography. Baldwin, for example, experienced a conversion and religious awakening very similar to that depicted in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, his first novel. Like John Grimes, the main character, Baldwin struggled with sexual desire and alienation from his own artistic and intellectual aspirations. His later writings also chronicle his conflicted, often ambivalent relationship to institutionalized religion and to the Christianity of his youth. Hardy asserts that scholars have not taken Baldwin's complicated religious heritage seriously enough nor considered how his remarkable and reflective journey can shed light on our understanding of the ambiguous power of faith and belief, its capacity to both "promote and restrict the possibilities for human freedom" (xiii). It is within the tension that is engendered by the conflicted realities of exilic experience and compromised faith that Hardy believes that Baldwin's work demonstrates what is most "tragic" about black American religion.

It would be too easy to conclude that James Baldwin's critiques of the Christian God and institutionalized Christianity signified his ultimate rejection of religion, and Hardy argues that to the end Baldwin's sense of the redemptive value of suffering, his moral rhetoric, and his prophetic stance toward politics were deeply indebted to African American Christian culture. "Despite his view that black religious expression harbored vengeful attitudes and illusory promises, he remained captive to its rhythms, language, and themes throughout his career" (xi). As Baldwin takes us deeply inside his own personal spiritual journey from redemption to betrayal, his writings show that along with the doubt, self loathing, and disfigurement that might be fostered by religious culture, there are also powerful expressions of humanity—dignity, community, strength—that emerge even in the face of crushing injustice.

Yvonne Chireau
Swarthmore College

Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement. By Christine Rosen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004. viii + 286 pp. \$35.00 cloth.

Eugenics has traditionally been the purview of historians of science, but Christine Rosen has written a well-researched and illuminating exploration of the role that religious leaders played in the American eugenics movement. The book traverses ground that will be familiar to students of eugenics, but not to religious historians. The result is a book that brings together the literature on the Progressive reform, the Social Gospel, and the eugenics movement, and that delves into an impressive range of organizational papers, sermon collections, clerical journals, and eugenics tracts. Rather than perpetuating the myth that religion and science were totally incompatible, Rosen argues that liberal and modernist religious leaders, mostly postmillennialist evangelical ministers and some priests and rabbis, embraced eugenics as a way to apply scientific methods to a growing list of social problems.

Rosen's narrative begins with development of "scientific charity" and its appeal to those invested in the Social Gospel movement, and it continues