

Spirit Soundings: Religion, Race and the Arts in Twentieth Century America

Dissertation Abstract

If one were to trace a history of race and religion in America according to the accounts of black artists, the narrative would be as compelling as it is complex and often contradictory. My dissertation presents a telling of African American religious history through an engagement with the works and lives of black artists, rather than lay people, clergy, religious institutions and denominations, or the perceived insiders of formal religious traditions. In this light, the Harlem Renaissance (circa 1920s), the Black Arts Movement (circa 1960s), and Hip Hop music and culture (circa 1980-present) represent three distinct but related soundings on the meaning of religion and race in American history. I use twentieth century black art (literary, musical, theatrical and visual arts) as a resource for interpreting the significance of African American religion, as well as to interpret the significations of sacred and secular in American culture. Here the aim is to provide more than an analysis or reading of the varied representations of religion and spirituality that appear throughout black art forms. I argue that the arts, and black artists in particular, bear witness to religious tensions within American culture at particular historical junctures.

In each of the moments examined, or as I call them “soundings,” black artists working in various media have contributed in significant ways to the shape of African American religious culture. Since works of art are more than static texts or images and are artifacts of living cultures, I unpack their significance further by examining them within the larger context of the lives of the artists who produce them. To this end, I work with sources that I organize into three categories: religious biography (nonfiction writings, critical essays, autobiographies, memoirs and personal correspondence); religious representations (creative work including literary, visual and musical art forms); and responses from the religious power brokers (writings by Christian clergy and lay in response to black art). After introducing the dissertation (ch.1), I devote one chapter to each period in chronological order (ch.2-Harlem Renaissance, ch.3-Black Arts Movement, ch.4-Hip Hop), followed by a fifth and final chapter that draws on chapters two through four in order to theorize competing notions of sacred and secular in black communities and in American society more broadly. Collectively these voices help to frame a debate within black art and culture regarding how best to bring the resources of the “Spirit” to bear on the problem of race in twentieth century America.