

the editors contend that recent developments in spirituality have fostered a recovery of Plato's mysticism. With this retrieval of Plato's prominence in the context of Christian theology and Platonism, Weil's extraordinary "originality" emerges as a rich source in understanding the congruence of Platonism and Christianity. Accordingly, all 12 chapters reflect an appreciation of Weil's understanding of this relationship but are not limited to the specific philosophical or theological challenges of Christian Platonism.

The essays are organized around three themes: (1) Weil's Platonism, (2) metaphysical implications, and (3) relevance in the contemporary world. Among the contributors, Nancy's effort in locating Weil's reception of Platonism is an informative depiction of student and teacher and the unfolding of Weil's understanding of Plato as mystic, distinguishing her position from that of Alain. Several essayists take up the question of Plato and materialism in Weil's approach to philosophy of labor; Chenavier concludes that her originality is less a matter of "combining Christianity and Platonism" (74) than the integration of materialism and Christian Platonism. Patterson and Schmidt refine the issue of materialism, arguing that Weil's "sacramental ontology" and affirmation of this world counter a dominant polarization of spiritual and material realities. I hasten to note the persuasive argument developed by Gabellieri in his discernment of "metaxology" as an alternative to metaphysics, a position emerging, in part, from Weil's integration of love and reason. Mediation and Christological notions are juxtaposed in this brilliant analysis that invites the reader to grasp parallels with such postmodern thinkers as Levinas. Tracy notes the connection between Weil and Levinas regarding the ethics of the other but takes exception to her myopic view of Hebrew Scripture. His essay emphasizes the place of tragedy in reading Gospel accounts of Christ's passion and death on the cross.

Each essay is deserving of comment but space precludes more than a mention of Springsted's essay in this fine collection. The clarity with which he treats the scope and significance of Christian Platonism encourages further study of the contemporary significance of this scholarship. My only regret is that this essay is not the first in a uniquely accessible exploration of a difficult facet of Weil's contribution.

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James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture. By Clarence E. Hardy III. University of Tennessee Press, 2003. 168 pages. \$30.00.

In this deceptively slim volume, Clarence E. Hardy III provides a rich and complex portrait of the black holiness tradition as manifested in the life and writings of James Baldwin, the noted black writer, playwright, and social critic. This is particularly notable because Baldwin's literary works such as *Go Tell It on*

the Mountain and *The Fire Next Time* reflect a sophisticated use of black Christianity as a wellspring of inspiration for his fiction and non-fiction alike. Interestingly, many of Baldwin's biographers have concentrated most squarely on the late writer's considerations of racial identity and sexuality to the exclusion of any religious or spiritual concerns. While this book certainly investigates the construction of race, gender, and sexuality in Baldwin's life, Hardy offers a sensitive yet poignant examination of the writer's theological insights and moral development that includes yet ultimately goes beyond such matters. This book proves worthwhile in the ways that the author focuses upon Baldwin's rejection of Christianity and its deity as well as the plethora of sacred symbols that have been used perennially to demonize black people. To accomplish this task, Hardy utilizes a sublime interdisciplinary approach drawing upon literary criticism, cultural theory, black theology, and African-American religious history to interpret the tangible and theological legacies of black holiness culture as portrayed in Baldwin's writings.

Readers will benefit from Hardy's two-fold analysis of both the religious dimensions of James Baldwin's work and the definition of black religiosity in the modern era as a complex, multivalent reality. In Hardy's initial discussion of sex, hope, and crisis as a functional rubric for his treatment of black religiosity, the author indicates that he will "explore and situate this fundamental contradiction of church culture within the historical development of black evangelicalism in the United States and the complexities of Baldwin's own biography that has offered up these images of sexual bodies prancing before ancient gods" (16). Using Baldwin's work and its critique of black Christianity in this manner, Hardy proposes to amend what he deems a gross underappreciation of Baldwin's work within religious studies and theological education. That is, he contends that a figure like Baldwin deserves greater recognition within the canon of black theological discourse. He argues persuasively and passionately that Baldwin's writing serves as a model (or possibly even a cautionary tale) for present-day black theologians and religious scholars. Furthermore, he argues that Baldwin's writings prophesied the pernicious reality of living in a postwar American society becoming increasingly more balkanized along lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion. As Hardy illustrates throughout this book, it is because Baldwin identifies himself and argues very much from the margins of mainstream society, the writer's work is important in understanding key tensions within the contemporary black religious experience.

Probably, the strongest feature of Hardy's work is his keen insight into how the black holiness church and the broader evangelical Christian tradition shaped James Baldwin. Even though the black holiness tradition, as in the case of Pentecostalism, is one of the most thriving and fastest growing branches of black Protestantism, theologians and historians have devoted little scholarly notice to its remarkable rise and development. Renowned for upholding the moral purity of evangelical Christianity, the black holiness tradition emphasizes the primacy of divine will in the believer's life, human flesh as a manifestation of evil, a deeply intimate and ritualized conversion experience as a requisite measure of one's faith, and its endorsement of an unwavering standard of personal piety.

Yet Hardy states, “despite his view that black religious expression harbored vengeful attitudes and illusory promises, [Baldwin] remained captive to its rhythms, language, and themes throughout his career” (xi). Therefore, with irony fully intact, Hardy deftly employs James Baldwin as the ultimate eyewitness into the rarefied sacred realm of the black holiness church despite his subject’s self-determined posture as fervent apostate.

Considering Baldwin’s adamant denunciation of the black holiness church, it is necessary to assess Baldwin’s concept of God. By addressing the eponymous deity represented in the book’s title, Hardy illustrates how “to the extent that a supernatural external God continues to have a place in Baldwin’s published work, the Christian deity is consistently depicted as angry and malevolent” (44). For Baldwin, the Christian deity was not only silent and detached regarding the suffering of black bodies but was actually a malefactor in the lives of black people. In turn, Hardy also notes the relentlessness of shame, internalized racism, and self-loathing within black Christianity as shown in Baldwin’s work. This is especially evident in the book’s third chapter where Hardy examines Baldwin’s response to the pernicious nature of black suffering. Hardy interprets Baldwin’s articulation of theodicy wherein the late writer struggles to unmask a white Christian god who is elusive yet spiteful while also embracing the vitality and resilience of black culture—both sacred and secular—so deeply informed by its ill-fated quest of that selfsame god. Interestingly, Hardy indicates that “despite his view that black religious expression harbored vengeful attitudes and illusory promises, [Baldwin] remained captive to its rhythms, language, and themes throughout his career” (xi). The author is correct in his assessment that Baldwin’s rhetoric and ontology, despite the writer’s protestations to the contrary, “retains some relationship with the evangelical perspective of his youth” (50). Whether talking about the notion of redemptive suffering or the revelatory prospects of human sexuality and love, Hardy’s overall evaluation of Baldwin illustrates that the artist envisioned, understood, and approached the reality of his surroundings with the worldview derived from his black evangelical upbringing very much intact.

The author’s critique of the black holiness tradition’s ontological insularity is both valid and straightforward. For this reason, however, it is disconcerting to realize that his scholarly endeavor seems to replicate a similar insularity in his argumentation. *James Baldwin’s God* would have been better served if its comprehensive analysis had more openly engaged of scholars such as Cheryl Sanders, Anthony Pinn, Kelly Brown Douglas, Victor Anderson, Dwight Hopkins, Emilie Townes, and Lewis Gordon among others whose respective efforts could have contributed to Hardy’s core arguments. In other words, to justifiably accomplish Hardy’s implicit goal of promoting greater interest about the black holiness tradition beyond the hermetic confines of a self-isolated theology, it is important to frame his otherwise cogent and powerful study as more of a dialogue than a monologue.

Probably the most telling aspect of Hardy’s study is his statement that the postwar era is witnessing the declining significance of Christianity within the African-American experience. The author asserts that black theological discourse has not adequately focused on Baldwin’s “peculiar relationship with black Christianity” particularly the ways in which Baldwin’s crises of faith reveal “the

anatomy of a religious heritage” (xi) that includes apostasy. Hardy’s identification of Baldwin as one of the earliest black writers to decentralize black Christianity ushers forth considerable concerns about traditional black Protestantism’s perceived influence in the post-Civil Rights era. When told as a story of declension, Hardy states, “in a modern world in which much of the philosophical apparatus supporting religious belief has collapsed, religion has often been experienced as a burdensome compulsion that separates the physical body from the psychological self, even as it animates persons in their struggle for self-expression and identity” (9). Thus, using Baldwin as an exemplar of such a trenchant evaluation of religion, Hardy exhibits a willingness to explore the circumstances that might lead black people to reject organized religion and traditionally accepted notions of God altogether. Hardy asserts that many scholars have neither paid adequate attention to Baldwin’s complicated perspectives on religion nor gleaned how his spiritual struggles might illuminate ways of better understanding the resonant power of faith and sacred belief in its ability to both “promote and restrict the possibilities for human freedom” (xiii). In so doing, Hardy’s comprehensive study of Baldwin reflects the growing interest among many recent scholars to seriously interrogate humanism, existentialism, agnosticism, and atheism as legitimate aspects of the black religious experience. As Hardy clearly indicates at the end of this book, he neither encourages nor embraces abandoning traditional Christianity in his own life and scholarship. Nevertheless, the author’s honest and empathetic interrogation of such marginalized perspectives within the study of black religion is definitely deserving of praise.

In conclusion, *James Baldwin’s God* suggests directions for subsequent scholarship about the holiness tradition within black culture. Theologians, literary critics, historians, and religious studies scholars will find the book invaluable, thanks to his great facility with a wide variety of methodological and theological insights. Hardy’s thoughtful, provocative interpretation of Baldwin’s legacy reveals a writer whose greatest contribution was equally served by his fictionalization of black life and faith in addition to his prophetic willingness to speak truth to power in his non-fiction writings. Without a doubt, the book promises to become a classic work among readers interested in the interplay of black religion, literature, and history, thanks to its innovative, thought-provoking approaches to understanding James Baldwin as literary artist, social critic, and religious thinker.

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The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972–2003. By Judith Plaskow. Beacon, 2005. 272 pages. \$19.00.

Judith Plaskow’s collection of essays, *The Coming of Lilith*, is a most welcome addition to feminist and Jewish theological resources. It will instantly become a popular textbook, because it incorporates a broad swath of her thinking that has