

## [Rabin on Johnson, 'African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom'](#)

Review published on Friday, July 7, 2017

**Sylvester A. Johnson.** *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 438 pp. \$32.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-15700-1.

**Reviewed by** Shari L. Rabin (College of Charleston) **Published on** H-AmRel (July, 2017)  
**Commissioned by** Bobby L. Smiley

As a sophomore in college, I enrolled in a course on African American religious history. The very first reading was a Christian missionary text about Africans, a callously racist document that shocked and confused me, a white Jewish teenager. I remember earnestly asking in class that day, How could any African American be a Christian, given this history of racism and violence? Sylvester Johnson's magisterial *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* goes some way toward explaining this paradox.

A central thesis of this book is that the violent and exclusionary aspects of American history are no accident. Rather, they are intertwined with the nation's founding premises of freedom and democracy and they fundamentally shape religious subjectivities. The United States, Johnson argues, "govern[s] through the colonial relation of power," which means that certain groups are subjugated and dominated (p. 2). This argument has several important implications: 1) it incorporates the experience of slavery while also attending to a range of other unfreedoms, 2) it focuses on relations of power rather than phenotypic difference as the driving force of racial formation, and 3) it takes a global perspective, incorporating the imperial forays of the United States and other "White polities," in Johnson's formulation. Large swaths of this book appear absent of African Americans and/or religion, and yet this is on purpose. As Johnson argues toward the end of the book, "scholars must be able to conceive of race without the somatic body, of religion without the creed" (p. 400). Power is central here, as religious formations both fuel and respond to the unequal relations that create race.

The result is an account that includes familiar topics and characters, but also many that are unfamiliar. The book begins in early modern Africa with Kongolese-Portuguese encounters. Here Johnson turns his eye to commercialism as a site of religious and imperial interaction. As Europeans and Africans exchanged material goods, African religious materiality--the fetish--came into conflict with Christian theologies and the European trade imperatives. These differences, in the hands of white Europeans, became evidence of African inferiority. Nation-states soon rose alongside merchant empires, fusing political and economic concerns with Christian theological formations, namely its supercessionism. Efforts to reform at home and civilize abroad were both means of deploying colonial power and expressions of Christian supremacy.

Here is where we get to my long-ago question about African American Christianization. Johnson's argument is that Africans were not passive victims but "exploited structures of imposition to eke out subtle but nonetheless significant spaces of power" (p. 138). Enslaved Africans embraced the religion

of their conquerors, writing themselves into its stories and geographies, even as they imported its biases and inequalities. Hence free black Olaudah Equiano, who positioned Africans as the lost tribes of Israel and argued for the abolition of slavery, even as he denigrated native African religions. This irony deepened into the nineteenth century, as free blacks embraced settlement projects, first in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, and finally in Liberia. Johnson insists that these should not be described as emigration or colonization schemes. Rather, they were forms of black settler colonialism that used Christianity to “justif[y] efforts to exterminate African religions, kill native Africans, conquer them to seize their land, and ultimately reduce them to a condition of slavery” (p. 189). While black settlers from the United States were “free” in some sense, the locals were anything but.

Back in the United States, blacks responded to chattel slavery and to the “legal apartheid” that succeeded it in two ways (p. 209). First, they pursued integration via western emigration (see the exodusters) and military service (Buffalo soldiers). Second, intellectuals like Martin Delany and Henry McNeal Turner fashioned political theologies that exposed the ugly colonial truth. Into the twentieth century, “the historical and material conditions of colonialism ... help[ed] shape the subjectivity, means, and agency of [subjugated] peoples. The exigencies of living in a global network of powerful states--preeminently Western and anti-Black--defined the terms on which Black resistance and revolution would occur” (p. 289). This was true in the case of Garveyism, which sought to take back power through black imperialism, and of black ethnic religions, which posited new origin stories for African Americans, albeit ones still rooted in Western traditions. These forms of black religious critique were in constant conversation with international anticolonial movements and they rose alongside an increasingly belligerent intelligence state that sought to subdue them.

The political stakes of Johnson’s project become especially clear toward the end of the book. This account of the civil rights movement locates it in the context of the Cold War and the rise of the FBI and the CIA. Foreign policy, imbued with theological import, justified the ruthless harassment and surveillance of those charged with “godless communism,” including black activists. The closer people like Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, and Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) got to an anticolonial critique of the United States, the more brutally they were treated, incidents which Johnson narrates in unsparing detail. In more recent history, concern for “national security” has resulted both in mass incarceration and the demonization of Islam. While black Muslims were the first to be targeted by US intelligence agencies, ultimately non-black Muslims were also racialized, associated with terrorism, and subject to constant surveillance. Throughout American history and into the present, Johnson argues, democracy has valorized an exclusionary conception of “the people,” in the process perpetuating colonial relations of power.

There are some inherent tensions between the subtitle and title of this book. The former, “Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom,” points to its critical and theoretical approach, while the latter, “African American Religions, 1500-2000,” gives the impression of a popular historical survey. To be sure, the book earns its time span and it is a remarkable work of synthesis, drawing on secondary materials from diverse fields of inquiry. It places sweeping transnational political histories alongside careful intellectual biographies of particular (usually male) figures. And yet, Johnson does not pull punches, as should be clear from his critiques of some of our most vague and universally praised values. He is interested in the fraught relationship between religion, power, and freedom, and this story has real villains and heroes. Indeed, one of the most succinct summaries of Johnson’s own thesis comes from one of his biographical subjects, Kwame Ture, toward the end of the book:

“Our people are a colony within the United States, and you [Cubans] are colonies outside the United States.... Black communities in America are the victims of White imperialism and colonial exploitation” (p. 369). Johnson’s most significant contribution is to renarrate American religious history with the US state and these practices of inequality at the center.

This is an ambitious and important book, but it is one that I suspect will be more admired than beloved. It demonstrates impeccable historiographical and theoretical facility and yet it is both lengthy and incredibly dense. Chapters climb to over sixty pages and the prose is filled with multisyllabic words, passive constructions, and knotty abstractions. If it had been assigned to me in that seminar when I was nineteen, I would not have been able to understand it. Johnson has been pursuing this work elsewhere--in an American Academy of Religion seminar on religion and US empire and in a recent edited volume on the FBI and religion--demonstrating the richness and relevance of this vein of inquiry. While this book is not for undergraduates, it is a must-read for scholars and teachers, precisely because it wrests us out of our comfort zones, temporally, geographically, and critically.

**Printable Version:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=46230>

**Citation:** Shari L. Rabin. Review of Johnson, Sylvester A., *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom*. H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. July, 2017. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46230>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).