Black Lives and Sacred Humanity: Toward an African American Religious Naturalism by Carol Wayne White (review)

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the parental metaphor. A life that begins with a birth announcement will end with an obituary, and Shults's compelling text asks us to come to grips with the former so that we might aid in the writing of the later.

Black Lives and Sacred Humanity: Toward an African American Religious Naturalism. Carol Wayne White. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016. 157 pp. $25 cloth. (Reviewed by Gary Slater, St. Edward's University)

It speaks to the illogic of our public life that the slogan "All Lives Matter" has come to stand directly against "Black Lives Matter" within contemporary discourse on race. Carol Wayne White's *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity*, among its other achievements, confirms the absurdity of such an opposition. White shows how historic efforts to defend and define the humanity of African Americans offer a vision in which all human lives do not simply matter but are in fact sacred within nature. White's effort to marshal elements within the black tradition to develop her notion of sacred humanity succeeds; in fact, the entailments of her arguments go further still. In addition to undermining the binary of black lives/all lives, the book effectively trespasses across such oppositions as humanism/naturalism, science/poetry, and nature/African American religiosity. Though *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity* arguably overextends its antimodernism by leaning on historicism in opposition to metaphysics, the book will be of interest to anyone wishing to engage key figures with the African American intellectual tradition, seek out new intellectual territory for religious naturalism, or grapple with the concept of sacred humanity as sensitive to critical theories of social justice.

White locates her effort to develop a distinctly African American religious naturalism in relation to key figures from the black intellectual tradition, focusing on Anna Julia Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Baldwin. Without claiming these figures as full-bore religious naturalists themselves, White sees each thinker as making a distinct contribution to her project. From Cooper, she finds inspiration in the use of richly naturalistic metaphors to support a communal ontology, such that the experiences affecting any one person or culture redound to the experience of all. As White puts it, "For Cooper, if any part is held back, then the whole is diminished" (53). From Du Bois, White highlights the ability to creatively appropriate the symbols of black religiosity, in that Du Bois draws upon religious symbols to explore what it means to be human within raced living. And from Baldwin, she examines how reflection on the symbolic meaning of whiteness and blackness within religious and cultural

systems supports Baldwin's argument that embracing blackness is essential to human flourishing, nationally as well as personally. White argues that, taken together, Cooper, Du Bois, and Baldwin demonstrate the ways in which black religiosity can be a vehicle for something more fundamental than transcendental theism: life affirmation. By embedding within nature the struggle for self-actualization amidst prejudice, exploring religiosity semiotically, and claiming a distinct subjectivity for African Americans, these three writers lend credence to a sense of "black humans as lovers of life and vital centers of value at a critical time in American history" (94). This shared affirmation of life is relevant to White's project for at least two reasons. First, life affirmation within the black tradition is relevant because *all* traditions are relevant; simply by expressing a distinct form of being human, these black intellectuals have contributed to the sense that humans are sacred centers of value. Second, the black tradition is relevant in a unique way because of the all-too-common attempts to *deny* the full humanity of African Americans, a fact which renders these creative expressions of black humanity especially instructive.

White's engagement with the African American intellectual tradition is complemented by her understanding of religious naturalism. White's naturalism sees religiosity in functionalist term, in which religiosity is predicated through constellations of symbols that enlist cultural categories and demonstrate the human capacity both to value and to be *of* value. From value comes a sense of wonderment at the relationships that intersect within every person and extend across cultural and natural contexts. As with naturalism more broadly, White's vision makes no appeal to transcendental theism. Rather, the book draws from process philosophy to articulate senses of relationality, value, change, and natural accounts of subjectivity within human life. As White puts it, "At the heart of religious naturalism in all of its variants is a basic conviction: any truths we are ever going to discover, and any meaning in life we should uncover, are revealed to us through the natural order" (30). *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity* is conversant with a wide range of naturalist thought, engaging with such naturalist thinkers as Loyal Rue or Catherine Keller in a way that blends poetry and science, celebrates humanism alongside naturalism, and extolls scientific reasoning without lapsing into reductive materialism.

At the intersection of White's religious naturalism and her analyses of the black tradition—at the core of the book—lies the concept of sacred humanity. White's definition of sacred humanity is connected to "the notion of humans as interconnected, social, value-laden organisms in constant search of meaning (cognition), enamored of value (beauty, goodness, love), and instilled with a sense of purpose (telos)" (3). Animating the notion of sacred humanity is a key question: "how should we understand the complex human

being who is affirmed in African American religious discourse?" (19). Sacred humanity entails that humans are achievements of value, yet also that we are fundamentally unfinished beings who are ever in the process of becoming. White links sacred humanity to a distinct moral imagination, one with implications for social action. As she puts it, "The sacredness of human beings becomes one precondition for conceiving particular notions of communal moral reasoning, for it is only through an acceptance of one's material, concrete embodiment and perceived relatedness that one begins envisioning (or is even challenged to think of) what might lie beyond one's self-perceptions and thoughts" (122). Although the concept of sacred humanity touches on issues explored by such thinkers as Victor Anderson and Anthony Pinn, *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity* succeeds in staking out the distinct intellectual space created by the neglect of naturalism within analyses of African American religion, as well as a neglect of African American religion within analyses of religious naturalism.

In addition to its insights on sacred humanity, religious naturalism, or the black tradition, *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity* contains two further elements that might interest readers of the *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*. The first has already been suggested, which is that White's honing in on the black tradition makes an innovative argument for how the particular speaks to and supports the universal. As White puts it, "My model of African American religious naturalism emerges out of a critical awareness that religiosity is not necessarily centered in any specific tradition; rather, it can be a mode of reflecting on, experiencing, and envisioning one's relationality with all that is" (119). There are at least three promising implications here. First, White's formulation contributes to the perennial philosophical question of the one and the many through the resources of religious naturalism. Second, her work speaks to a link between speculative philosophy and social justice; by "employing specific images, symbols, and rituals, black religiosity has functioned in the United States to address fundamental issues of life and death for black agents intent on living fully and with dignity" (18). Third, White's work speaks to creative possibilities for thought and ethics of otherness; as she eloquently puts it, "When I meet a person, I am encountering another center of value" (42–43). White thus offers a compelling synthesis of, among other threads, process philosophy, religious naturalism, and interpersonal ethics.

The second particularly relevant feature of *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity* is its sense of possibilities not yet realized. This is to say that White's ongoing work could be complemented by several prominent projects within contemporary American theology and philosophy, including Gary Dorrien's, on the black social gospel, or Robert C. Neville's, on the axiological relevance of the problem

of the one and the many. Neville could make for a particularly compelling conversation partner given White's critique of metaphysics within philosophy of religion. While White argues that humans are inescapably historical, which is true, her argument that "a metaphysical grounding of our beliefs is not necessary, or even theoretically plausible" (127) depends on one's definition of metaphysics. To indict metaphysics too broadly risks replicating a historicism/metaphysics binary that has appeared elsewhere in contemporary American thought—for example, in Cornel West's essay "Dispensing with Metaphysics in Religious Thought"—and foreclosing metaphysics being seen as a comparative, hypothetical discipline. Neville's work employs metaphysics in a more culturally pluralistic manner than the imperializing, dogmatic version that is the implicit target of White's antimetaphysical critique. Finally, the ethical praxis White mentions in her conclusion is tantalizingly unfinished, challenging readers to envision ethical scenarios of their own while also stirring up anticipation for wherever White takes her research hereafter. *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity* thus feels like an important step in an unfolding project.

The Life of Reason: Reason in Religion (1905). George Santayana. Vol. 7, book 3 of *The Works of George Santayana*, critical edition. Coedited by Marianne S. Wokeck and Martin A. Coleman with an introduction by James Gouinlock. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014. 337 pp. $75 cloth. (Reviewed by Robert S. Corrington, Drew University)

In the history of religious naturalism, Santayana's 1905 *Reason in Religion*, the third book of *The Life of Reason*, stands as a foundational text and is also among the most important texts that Santayana ever wrote. In it he lays out his highly unique conception of the religious life on the other side of traditional religious belief and creates an agnostic, even atheistic, perspective that yet finds a key place for the sheer poetry and transforming power of religion in personal life. His own history made him deeply attuned to the ritual and poetry of the Roman Catholic traditions, and he had an almost inverse hostility to or at least distain for the Northern Protestant traditions.

Some of his most delicious and caustic passages in *Reason in Religion* concern his arch critique of the forms of Protestantism with which he grew up in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts:

> It boasts, not without cause, of its depth and purity; but this depth and purity are those of any formless and primordial substance. . . . It accordingly