

Book Reviews

A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness. By Lisa Allen. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021. xix + 221 pages. \$28.00.

In the past forty years womanist theology has established itself as an innovative and indispensable tradition of scholarship. However, it is worth questioning whether in our classrooms and in our research, we successfully engage womanist theology beyond the level of abstract principles, housed in one particular “contextual” field. What Lisa Allen’s book offers is an opportunity for scholars and teachers to go further: to dwell in the space of womanist imagination and epistemology more deeply and watch this method produce genuinely new fruits in a new area of theological scholarship.

The core of Allen’s contribution lies in her articulation of a deeply researched and historically grounded womanist liturgical theology for the Black Protestant church. She provides the essence of what she describes as a “new paradigm for worship, rooted in African ancestral cosmologies and communal ontologies, that recovers African and early African American liturgical practices that, for Black worshipping congregations and communities, have proven meaningful” (xii). Her goal is not simply to produce theological innovation through a simplistic retrieval of traditional forms. It is rather to honor the liturgical legacy of the Black church by tracing and embracing its roots, critiquing its theological deviations, and offering a path forward on the basis of a womanist hermeneutic. According to Allen, the Black church in the twenty-first century has lost much of its spiritual and moral authority and experienced significant declines in membership. At stake is the very possibility of its survival.

Allen’s project is ambitious, and one of its principal strengths lies in its great scope. In the course of three parts, Allen leads the reader on a journey through virtually the entire history of the people whom she calls *Africans in America* (22). Part One establishes a liturgical methodological framework and performs an initial excavation of the African roots of worship in the Black church. Allen here enunciates a vision of “Black worship and liturgy as communal action that is dynamically expressed in relationships between God, individuals, and neighbors; it is focused on God’s activity in the lives of Black people; it addresses the lived experiences of Black people; and it affirms God’s plans for the future of Black people” (8). In the Black worship

experience, Allen identifies an intimate bond between liturgy and justice, one that is founded on an African cosmology of interdependence and a view of the “High God” as liberator.

In Part Two, Allen follows the subsequent development of Black worship through the emergence of praise houses and formal Black churches. She finds in the dynamics of denominationalism a continued legacy of equating liturgy with justice but also the infiltration of white supremacist Eurocentric theologies into Black worship. Ultimately, Allen takes aim directly at evangelical theology and the prosperity gospel as primary examples of where the Black church has gone wrong, exchanging a legacy of worship grounded in communal righteousness and responsibility for an individualistic gospel of personal salvation. Part Three endeavors to re-establish the bond between liturgy and justice through a reassessment and reconfiguration of Black worship in light of a womanist ethics and hermeneutics.

Allen’s work is an enormous achievement of historical and systematic theology. It is clear step forward for the fields of liturgy and ethics as well as Black religious studies. Given the density of its engagement with sources, it is perhaps most appropriate for use in a graduate theological classroom, and indeed should be “required reading” for any community of scholars seeking a way into the rich history of the Black church in America or an example of how womanist principles can enliven theological sub-disciplines like liturgical theology. Readers will likely find that the final constructive part of the book is disproportionately short in comparison to the historical material and will desire a clearer practical application, which Allen alludes to in her final pages. The womanist perspective, she says, “has the potential to produce richer, more meaningful, holistic, and transformative worship experiences for all attendees” (208). There is no doubt that Allen’s book will inspire future pastoral and practical theological work, and perhaps even give rise to creative new modes of worship planning and performance.

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Cathonomics: How Catholic Tradition Can Create a More Just Economy. By Anthony M. Annett. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022. xix + 315 pages. \$29.95.

Might it be possible to actually create a more just global economy, an alternative to what Pope Francis has described as “the economy that kills”? For Anthony M. Annett, a Gabelli Fellow at Fordham University and a Climate Change and Sustainable Development Advisor with Columbia University’s Earth Institute, it is not only