

The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology

Katie G. Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 540 pp. \$160. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780199755653.

Sankofa, a word from the Akan tribe in Ghana, is an influential philosophical concept from the African Diaspora that has been used to characterize elements of African American life. The symbol is based on a mythical bird with its feet firmly planted forward with its head turned backwards. The literal translation of the word for the symbol is “it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind.”

Evoking the consciousness of returning to one’s past, *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology* provides a survey of the academic content of black theology and its impact on the study of religion in the United States. As stated in the introduction, the volume is intended as a “self-evaluation and internal critique that lays out its structure, content, and logic with an eye towards its future” (5). Ethicist and womanist scholar Katie Cannon (Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education) and humanist and religious scholar Anthony Pinn (Rice University) invite to the table a communion of the foremost contemporary scholars of African American theology to examine the interdisciplinary nature of African American theology and critically engage major topics and development of the theological tradition including eschatology, soteriology, Christology, womanist theology, biblical hermeneutics, and ethics.

The Handbook contains thirty-four essays organized thematically into five sections. Section I, “Sources,” provides a framework for the development of African American theology, beginning with an examination of African American history as a crucial source for the discipline. A shared construction of black identity and historical trends in black thought and politics informs the development of African American theology, which authors attribute primarily to James Cone, an African Methodist Episcopal minister, professor, and author of the groundbreaking work *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969). Essays on reason, theoretical commitments, and methodologies in African American theology provide an understanding of the material of black theology and its rootedness in culture and history. In “African American Religious Experience,” M. Shawn Copeland problematizes the formation of African American religious experience and notes that the formation and practice of African American religion is based on a common experience and narrative of oppression. Terrence L. Johnson’s essay on reason emphasizes the limits of theodicy and demonstrates how blackness can expand reason into an emancipatory way of justifying human agency and “transgressing the boundaries of traditions and narratives” (107). This section also analyzes the problems of the construction of black identity as a response to white supremacy, which, Stephen C. Finley notes, “ignores the complexity and fluidity constituting African American lives” (22).

Discussions of doctrine in African American theology focus the essays in Section II of the volume. Keri Day provides an analysis of the four major camps that comprise the doctrines of God in African American theology, including Christian personalism, black liberation and womanist theologies, atheistic humanism, and pragmatic reconstructions of African American theology. Through analysis of the major categories and concerns of theological discourse, essays in this section cover how the nature of Christ, the Holy Spirit, humanity, salvation, and creation function epistemologically and point to fundamental convictions that influence and encourage a fully articulated black theology of liberation that contextualizes oppression, liberation, justice, and God’s action in the world on behalf of African Americans. R. Drew Smith’s essay on “The Church in African American Theology” illuminates the social history of the church and its function as a place of spiritual development and refuge while also offering critiques of the interpretation of scripture, participation in social activism, sexism, and heterosexism in Black church cultural space.

Section III, “Internal Debates,” summarizes significant developments within African American theology. As a whole, these essays engage in deep reflection and scholarly inquiry about the checks and balances within African American

theology, including attention to audience and pedagogy. Topics covered include women's knowledge and embodiment in womanism; the assumption of theism, Christocentrism, and humanism; diasporic dialogue; and pluralistic faith traditions. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan's historiography of womanist theology as both a corrective discipline and mode of black theologizing launches a six-essay interrogation of the precarious cultural narratives that motivated an expansion of African American theology in the 1980s with the increased influence of black liberation and womanist theologies at progressive Christian seminaries and divinity schools. Postmodern thought attends to the continued relevance of a contemporary theology that is inclusive and responsible for community as Dennis Wiley succinctly describes in his essay "Audiences of Accountability in African American Theology."

In "Ongoing Challenges," Section IV, the cultural context that grounds African American theology resurfaces as a challenge to articulate a distinctly African American way of doing God-talk and realizing historical agency. Victor Anderson challenges contemporary African American theology "to imagine, articulate, cultivate, and reproduce the conditions of possibility for this plenitude of being within religious and morally situated moments of black existential hope" (394). Six essays cover the various aspects of early African American theology and analyze how Africa and African-ness figure into the self-description of African American theology. Lewis R. Gordon illustrates the complexity of the history of religions and African identity and highlights the paradox that African Americans are "inside outsides of the modern world" (373). Additional questions about the positioning of African American theology in modernity are raised by Anthony G. Reddie as he identifies how black and womanist theologies can engage and critique the global economy.

The volume concludes with a trifecta of articles concerning "Prospects for the Future" in Section V. The essays in this section ask questions of religious organization and cultural production in African American theologizing. Jonathan L. Walton documents the black spiritual movement from New Orleans to Azusa Street in his essay on the growth of the prosperity gospel and its effect on African American theology. William James Jennings invites scholars to engage in a practice of routine reflection on the character of a black public consciousness and its potential consequences for communal culture and how it contributes to the wider ecclesial and social ethos in which African American theology operates. Emilie Townes imagines a future trajectory for African American theology and closes the volume by calling upon the discipline's capacity to validate black culture as a primary source and "foundation for exploring the religious worldviews of black folk in the United States and beyond" (487).

The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology accomplishes the editors' objective of providing detailed description, analysis, and constructive discussions concerning African American theology for scholars and advanced students. A reader with a casual interest in the subject could also benefit from this approachable reference aid. The contributors exemplify the ecumenical, interdisciplinary nature of African American theology with the inclusion of perspectives of Protestant and Catholic writers, as well as perspectives from non-Christian religions, African spiritualities, and non-theistic orientations. Essays follow a repetitive multi-point paragraph structure that aids understanding and offers continuity.

Though most scholars begin with an overview of how their topic is connected to the evolution of responses to James Cone's definitive *Black Theology* and subsequent scholars, the volume would benefit from a timeline or chronological graphic highlighting the major movements and scholars in African American theology. In support of collection development, each essay concludes with selected texts that would constitute a well-rounded library of the key topics. In addition to these texts, the handbook's final section on "Prospects for the Future" could be bolstered with an exploration of relevant contemporary issues such as the Black Lives Matter Movement, the Flint water crisis, and the Dakota Access Pipeline. Other works to put in conversation with *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology* include *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement Is Overcoming the Politics of Division and Fear* by Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II; *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* by Drew G. I. Hart; *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* by Kelly Brown Douglas; *Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership and Awakening Community* by Leah Gunning Francis; and *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor.

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