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# From the Editor

## Facilitating an Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Religion

by Regennia N. Williams

*“I am the silence that you cannot understand.”* – Nana Peazant, *Daughters of the Dust*

Religion has long been the subject of scholarly studies related to the social, cultural, and political history of Africa and the Diaspora. In his classic study, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), John S. Mbiti declared that African religions and African history were all but inseparable. A generation later, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, authors of *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1989), insisted that the study of religion continued to shed important light on the history and culture of a people. Other intellectuals drew similar conclusions at the turn of the 21st century.

By 2009, discussions about African American religion and spirituality were further complicated by factors related to class, gender, and ethnicity. This is certainly true for the increasingly diverse African-based communities in the United States, where immigration, internal migration, and economic conditions are transforming

institutionalized religion, and established and emerging scholars are busy contributing new works to an already rich body of knowledge on this subject.

In *The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religion* (Indiana University Press, 2009), for example, Edward E. Curtis IV and Danielle Brune Sigler make special note of the class-related biases reflected in the “church-cult/sect” dichotomy found in many scholarly studies of mainline Christian denominations and their marginalized (frequently lower-class) counterparts. (See my review of this book on pages 49 and 50.) Today, the proliferation of studies on the growing influence of Islam in America, political and economic changes in the Middle East, debates about the ordination of women and gays, the political influence of evangelical Christians, and concerns about the constitutionality of faith-based initiatives in the United States suggest that

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interest in religion as a topic of academic inquiry is alive, well, and growing.

*Praying Grounds and Contested Terrain: African Americans, Religion, and the Academy* is the theme for this first issue of *The Journal of Traditions and Beliefs*, the peer-reviewed publication of the Initiative for the Study of Religion and Spirituality in the History of Africa and the Diaspora (RASHAD). Challenges related to the completion of my work with the Praying Grounds Oral History Project, the Spiritual Gifts Chorus, and other RASHAD-related activities at Cleveland State University provided inspiration for both the launching of the journal and the selection of the current theme. It is my hope that this initial effort will both enrich and further enliven the aforementioned debates, and facilitate an interdisciplinary dialogue on religion in the academy. Based on the scholarly essays and other contributions to this issue, I am convinced that my hope is not unfounded.

In “The Matrix of African American Sacred Music in the 21st Century,” Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan offers a Womanist perspective on African American religious life and worship traditions. This essay is based, in part, on her keynote lecture for RASHAD’s Spring 2009 Religious History and Sacred Music Institute. The call for submissions invited authors to consider the academic terrain upon which the ideas of religionists and scholars often meet and clash. Kirk-Duggan’s essay reminds readers, however, that, when it comes to sacred music, contests are staged on many different sites. In the

author’s words, her essay “explores the praying grounds and contested terrains of African American sacred music in the twenty-first ‘century.’”

E. Paulette Isaac’s essay on the role of church ministries in shaping educational aspirations of congregants suggests that academicians are not the only ones interested in education. Her study, “Lyceum Guild: A Ministry on a Mission,” highlights the long history of African American self-help programs that link religious education and racial uplift. Within the context of church learning, African American men and women are viewed as change agents in their own right as they embrace teaching with a missionary’s zeal. For Isaac, “Churches as well as community-based organizations have served as the primary provides for informal learning among African Americans. Within the church, ministries serve as the conduit for learning among congregational members.”

“From Praying Grounds to Spiritual Gifts: A History in Photographs” features the visual evidence of RASHAD’s efforts to connect campus and community life since its formal organization in 2007. All images are by Jeffery Ivy, unless otherwise noted. This photographic essay links the current RASHAD initiative to the Praying Grounds Oral History Project, which traces its history to the summer of 2003. Praying Grounds narrators are among the singers, scholars, and other individuals pictured. When processing of the oral history collection is complete, all Praying Grounds interviews

and transcripts will be available on line at the RASHAD website:  
[www.ClevelandMemory.org/pray](http://www.ClevelandMemory.org/pray).

This issue also includes contributions from advanced graduate and undergraduate students—and a staff librarian—in the section containing reviews of new and noteworthy books and audio recordings, a bibliography on African American religion, and a discography. Judith MacKeigan, a master's degree candidate in the Department of History at Cleveland State University, contributed a review of Marvin A. McMickle's *The Audacity of Faith: Christian Leaders Reflect on the Election of Barack Obama*. Stephanie Barbee edited and prepared the introduction for our discography, "The Essential Gospel Music Listening Library." Barbee, a senior majoring in Social Work, served as RASHAD's STARS Research Assistant in 2009. STARS (Student Achievement Through Research and Scholarship) is a program designed to identify and nurture promising undergraduate students in their pursuit of graduate and professional education. At *Traditions & Beliefs'* invitation, Marianne Nolan, Head of Reference and librarian for History, Black Studies, and Art, used the new RefWorks® online research management service to compile our bibliography of "Recent Scholarship on African American Religion." All titles listed are for books that were published in the 21st century.

Our first "Letter to the Editor," "Sufism in Senegal," comes from Mamadou Seck. He invites students of religion to go back, intellectually, to

Africa, and reflect upon the influence of Islamic traditions in a Sub-Saharan nation. Coming from an African-born scholar, this letter reflects the thoughts of one of the many engaged scholars whose contributions are so vital to the life of RASHAD. Like Nana Peasant, the matriarch in Julie Dash's award-winning film, "Daughters of the Dust," our contributors' voices can be heard above the sound of the Atlantic's waters crashing against the shores of Africa and the Americas. The ideas discussed herein span that ocean. An interdisciplinary, Trans-Atlantic dialogue has begun, and we invite other scholars to help break the silence on their own topics of interest, and join us in building bridges of understanding. ❖

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