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Recommended Citation

Yvonne Patricia Chireau. (2010). "Review Of "The African Diaspora And The Study Of Religion" Edited By T.L. Trost". *Nova Religio*. Volume 14, Issue 2. 127-129.
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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS + DIGITAL PUBLISHING

The African Diaspora and the Study of Religion by Theodore Louis Trost

Review by: Yvonne Chireau

Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions, Vol. 14, No. 2 (November 2010), pp. 127-129

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/nr.2010.14.2.127>

Accessed: 03/03/2014 12:41

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The African Diaspora and the Study of Religion. Edited by Theodore Louis Trost. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. xviii + 268 pages. \$90.00 cloth.

This timely volume emerges out of papers given at a 2005 symposium at the University of Alabama. The book's essays are organized around the categories of "religion" and "Africa" and to an extent, "Diaspora," through exploration of specific themes. And while the chapters reflect diverse disciplinary positions, they also underscore the complexities

involved with the notion of “African American Religion” as a unified field of study.

African American religion resists definition, especially when scholars try to identify an overall methodological approach or common theoretical orientation to the subject. Is African American religion historical or theological? Is it always embedded in specific contexts, bounded by particular communities of practice and thought? Or is there, as some writers insist, something inherently unstable about using “religion” and “Africa” as terms that reify cultural inventions? The essays in this volume do not attempt to answer all of these questions but instead provide a number of interesting cases that challenge the reader to consider a range of possibilities for understanding by viewing different texts, places, and periods.

Several of the essays expand the frames of definition of not only the idea of “religion,” but the African diaspora itself. The latter is normally taken to mean inquiries of African religious origins in the modern period that later manifested in black Atlantic environments such as the Caribbean, the Americas, or in transnational articulations of “New World” communities. Several essays broaden this perspective to focus upon the secondary “returns” and diasporas of Africans, such as Afe Adogame’s essay on African migrants in Christian churches in the United States and Europe, and Wilson Moses’ essay on Alexander Crummell’s idealistic attempts to create a high African civilization in Africa. In these examples, the term “African” in “African American religion” becomes the interpretive crux around which such definitions are made.

Settling the issue of determining what African American religion *is* seems to beg the very question for some writers here. Russell T. McCutcheon argues that a renewed self-consciousness about strategies of classification is required for academics engaged in post-colonial criticism in the field. Likewise, in a fine conclusion to the volume, Eddie Glaude suggests that attention to narrative necessarily leads one back to the trope of Africa as a foundational source of the “beginnings” of the study of African American religious history. Both of these thoughtful articles raise fundamental questions about the nature of academic discourse that every student of African and African American religions should come to terms with.

Furthermore, the idea of “religion,” which is usually identified in African American religious studies with Christianity and its institutional expressions, is problematized in several essays that foreground traditions as diverse as Rastafarianism and Islam, such as Maboula Soumahoro’s article on common nationalist strands in the Nation of Islam and Afro-Jamaican religious thought, and Fatimah Fanusie’s piece on Islam and black musicians in twentieth-century Boston. Other essays deal with Afro-Brazilian, Gnostic, and pragmatist religious formations, such as Maha Marouan’s literary interpretation of Toni Morrison’s novel *Paradise*,

Kelly Haye's methodological synthesis of magic and constructions of blackness in Macumba, and Jonathan Khan's exploration of religious naturalism by key African American writers. And of course, some essays look at vital new research on Afro-Caribbean religion in its most prominent forms (such as Santeria and Vodou); Christine Ayorinde focuses on Cuba, Angela Casteneda on Mexico, and Merinda Simmons on the writings of black American women.

Even those chapters in this collection which might be seen as representing more conventional approaches to African American religious history defy expectations. Regennia Williams' analysis of the career of the early twentieth-century composer Robert Nathaniel Dett extends the study of African American religion to include the sacred music of the African diaspora and examines Dett's interpretation of the spirituals, by which he challenged notions of "blackness" and "religion" in his time. Likewise, in a provocative essay on Pentecostalism as "African-derived religion," Matthew Waggoner makes a strong case for a revisionist reading of the thought and history of this important twentieth-century American movement.

The African Diaspora and the Study of Religion provides a good sampling of some recent writings on key topics. But do the essays constitute a coherent response to the looming questions of disciplinary identity, methodological self-consciousness, and critical analysis that confront readers and authors in this field? Not necessarily. Instead, they make for an appealing start to a much needed conversation, and offer a truly engaging study for yet another generation of scholars and teachers in African American religion.

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