

Black Lives and Sacred Humanity: Toward an African American Religious Naturalism. By Carol Wayne White. New York: Fordham University Press. x + 164 pages. \$25.00 (paper).
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In her *Black Lives and Sacred Humanity: Toward an African American Religious Naturalism*, Carol Wayne White proposes what she calls “an African American religious naturalism.” White’s argument is unexpected and original: a religion shorn of belief in the transcendent (119), and therefore one that responds to the challenges posed to religion by the Enlightenment, will also be uniquely equipped to affirm the sacredness of black humanity in the face of white supremacy. Although White recognizes that “the use of transcendental theological language was indispensable for many [African American] leaders” (12), she nonetheless contends that “any truths we are ever going to discover ... are revealed to us in the natural order” (30). White is no Thomist, however. For her, the fact that all of reality, including human beings, are “natural processes,” means that reality is best known through the hard sciences.

The purely natural character of reality only seems to discredit religion. In truth, White explains, religiosity is simply “a mode of ... experiencing ... one’s relationality with all that is” (119). And, since science proves “our connectedness with other living beings,” it qualifies as an inherently religious form of knowing (33). Religious naturalism rejects previous attempts to position science and religion as nonoverlapping magisteria: for White, science is humanity’s sole religious text. White’s naturalism is religious for another reason: since relationality of the natural world is sacred, religious naturalism enables human beings to access the sacred even after they have abandoned belief in a god. Urging us to direct our feelings of wonder and awe away from God and toward humanity (15), she locates the sacredness of humanity in its existence as an “embodied, value-laden social organism in constant search of meaning, enamored of value, and instilled with a sense of purpose” (43).

Religious naturalism also safeguards the sacredness of black humanity. In support of this claim, White lifts up Anna Julia Cooper’s “keen sense of the interconnectedness of human life,” W. E. B. Du Bois’ “view of religion as a natural process generated by the finite conditions of human life” (75), and James Baldwin’s belief that “human beings [not God] save one another” as paradigmatic of African American religious naturalism (115). Because each figure resisted white supremacy effectively, they prove that an African American religious naturalism is not just possible, but ethically necessary.

Unfortunately, however, White sometimes places too much faith in science. Scientific studies may be able to show that human beings are “enamored of

value,” but they cannot help human beings determine which values they ought to hold (28). In this same way, White seemingly argues not that “the evolutionary narrative” *can* “propel human’s efforts to create meaning and purpose,” but that it does so more or less inevitably (36). But this seems unlikely: while White perceives evolution as evidence that life is interconnected and purposeful, could it not just as credibly be interpreted as evidence that life is random, predatory, and cheap? White’s urgently needed attempt to bring science and religion into deep conversation unfortunately forgets that science, like religion, is interpreted by human communities who are often deeply habituated by social vices. As with religion, science will be only as good as the communities who translate its findings into ethical norms.

One also wonders whether connectedness is as much the problem as it is the solution. After all, the connectedness of all life requires that we kill and consume other species to stay alive. And while connectedness may resonate with Martin Luther King Jr.’s “beloved community,” it clashes with the thought of Malcolm X, whose black nationalism sought to sever the cord of interracial connectedness. Nor does White fully explain why we need science to instill in us a “responsibility to act in ways that promote the flourishing of all life” (126). Have not many human beings grasped these truths without the aid of modern science?

Despite these shortcomings, theologians ought to take White’s arguments seriously. Most theologians have ignored both the questions evolution raises and the potential answers it offers. For example, by grounding the sacred in the natural, White can help theologians start a conversation we did not realize we needed to have. The increasingly incredible notion of an incorporeal soul manning the controls of the human person continues to haunt contemporary theology. Her work also provides a sharp rebuttal to academic racial chauvinism: too often, white scholars cordon off the African American intellectual tradition into the merely ethical or topical; White demonstrates its broadly interdisciplinary significance.

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Over roughly the past decade, as rates of religious unaffiliation and disidentification have increased, a growing body of academic literature has