African American Religions, 1500–2000

This book provides a narrative historical, postcolonial account of African American religions. It examines the intersection of Black religion and colonialism over several centuries to explain the relationship between empire and democratic freedom. Rather than treating freedom and its others (colonialism, slavery, and racism) as opposites, Sylvester A. Johnson interprets multiple periods of Black religious history to discern how Atlantic empires (particularly that of the United States) simultaneously enabled the emergence of particular forms of religious experience and freedom movements as well as disturbing patterns of violent domination. Johnson explains theories of matter and spirit that shaped early indigenous religious movements in Africa, Black political religion responding to the American racial state, the creation of Liberia, and FBI repression of Black religious movements in the twentieth century. By combining religious studies methods with analysis of empire, Johnson explains the seeming contradictions that have shaped Black religions over several centuries.

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African American Religions,
1500–2000

Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom

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Contents

List of Figures page vii
Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

PART ONE

1 Black Atlantic Religion and Afro-European Commerce 13
   Afro-European Commercialism: Contact, Exchange, and Religion 14
   Elmina Castle and Afro-European Commerce 20
   Religion and Transnationalism in Cape Coast 33

2 On Religious Matters 56
   Empire and the Problem of Matter 59
   Dueling Revelations and Atlantic Exchanges 67
   Corporatism, New Rationalities, and the Commodity Fetish 91

3 Colonial Governance and Religious Subjectivity 107
   Empire, the Company-State, and Rationalities of Freedom 107
   Black Religion, Christian Freedom, and Racial Slavery 128
   Colonialism, Temporalities, and Christian Subjectivity 145

PART TWO

4 Stateless Bodies, African Missions, and the Black Christian Settler Colony 159
   White Revolution and Internal Colonialism 160
   From Internal Colony to Settler Colony 167
   Free Africans and the Black Settler Colony 177
Contents

5  Black Political Theology, White Redemption, and Soldiers for Empire  209
    Abolitionism and African American Political Theology  210
    Reconstruction, White Redemption, and Black Settler Colonialism  235
    Internal Colonialism and Overseas Imperialism  246

PART THREE

6  Garveyism, Anticolonialism, and State Repression of Black Religions  273
    The UNIA and Black Diaspora  274
    Black Ethnic Religions and Anticolonial Theology  294
    The Intelligence State and Black Religious Subversion  312

7  Fundamentalism, Counterintelligence, and the “Negro Rebellion”  325
    Orthodoxy and the Cold War  326
    Counterintelligence and the Civil Rights Movement  346
    Anticolonialism and Black Cultural Revolution  362

8  Black Religion, the Security State, and the Racialization of Islam  377
    African American Islam, Federal Repression, and US Empire  377
    Racializing Islam  384
    American Islam, Democracy, and Counterintelligence  395
    Conclusion: Black Religion, Freedom, and Colonialism  401

Selected Bibliography  407
Index  419
Figures

1.1 The West and West–Central regions of Africa became known as the “land of Guinea” following the rise of Afro-European commercialism in the 1400s. The phrase became interchangeable with “Black Africa.” This map is an early illustration of the region by the Dutch cartographer Jan Jansson (1588–1664).

1.2 Prospect of Cape Corse, or Coast Castle. This illustration of Cape Coast Castle appeared in John Green’s New General Collection of Voyages and Travels; Consisting of the Most Esteemed Relations, Which Have Been Hitherto Published in Any Language; Comprehending Everything Remarkable in Its Kind, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America (1745–1747).

2.1 This seventeenth-century map of West Central Africa, created by the Dutch cartographer Jan Jansson (1588–1664), shows the Kongo Kingdom and the Angola Kingdom as they were situated just decades before Dona Beatriz was born. Note that the north is oriented toward the left end of the map.

4.1 Map of the West Coast of Africa from Sierra Leone to Cape Palmas, including the colony of Liberia. This map of West Africa is based on Jehudi Ashmun’s surveys for the American Colonization Society. The inset on the upper right shows the ACS’s plans for the settler town of Monrovia.
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