

What Is African American Religion? by ANTHONY B. PINN. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011. xi + 116 pp. \$9.99.

In this small book Anthony Pinn distills the powerful argument in his earlier *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis:

Fortress, 2003) in just over one hundred pages. The core of his argument is that African American religion is a striving for “complex subjectivity” in a society that has often treated African Americans as objects rather than subjects. Focusing primarily on African American Christian traditions and the Nation of Islam, Pinn locates African American religion in the bodies of African Americans making meaning in the world.

Pinn begins his study with an overview of the nature of slavery in the Americas. This starting place is important for Pinn because he argues that what makes African American religion unique is its response to the terror of the American experience for African slaves and their descendants. In this way, African American religion is unintelligible without a deep understanding of the historical experience of Africans in America. Focusing on the embodied experience of African Americans and their material culture, Pinn argues against the tendency in the study of African American religion to locate such religion in “the Black Church,” Christianity, or formally sanctioned religious institutions. Rather, Pinn locates African American religion in every activity African Americans have undertaken to create ultimate meaning for their lives and in their world (64). Thus he finds religion as much in literature, clothing, art, and popular culture as he does in church buildings.

Pinn offers a compelling account of African American religion that attempts to be grounded in embodied experience and to encompass more than “the Black Church.” His historical account of embodied and material religion is convincing, and his formulation of “complex subjectivity” as a response to the dehumanizing aspects of the historical experience of African Americans is erudite. However, in his move to articulate complex subjectivity, he struggles to maintain his stated concern with African American bodies and material culture. Complex subjectivity, in this text, comes across as quite subjective. It is so subjective, in fact, that one may wonder if it is too broad a category accurately to be called “religion.” Pinn anticipates that these critics will raise their voices and makes a half-hearted attempt to cut them off by admitting, albeit reluctantly, that such a thing as a non-religious African American can exist (97). However, he seems to want to say that every African American strives to achieve complex subjectivity in resistance to the objectifying aspects of life in America for black bodies. Thus in his attempt to answer the questions “What is *African American* about African American religion?” and “What is *religious* about African American religion?” he seems to be more successful in answering the former than the latter.

I recommend this text to those teaching introductory courses in American religion, African American religion, and religious studies. Those looking for something that is quick and accessible while also clearly explaining many key themes in the study of African American religion will be pleased with this text.