

Henry Louis Gates Jr. *The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song*. New York: Penguin Press, 2021. 304 pages. \$14.99.

The Black Church by Henry Gates tackles the gargantuan task of chronicling the over four-hundred-year history of the Black church. Gates' work begins with the depiction of the embryonic steps of what would evolve into African American religious traditions that are first taken in the soil of African religious traditions. Gates contrasts this evidence of early religious exposure to religion broadly, and Christianity in particular, with later missionary efforts to introduce Christianity to the enslaved to illustrate how later presentations of Christianity would pervert its purpose, being tailored to justify the enslavement and subjugation of Blacks. Christianity serving as a tool of empire and oppression while simultaneously being used by Black communities as a means of subverting oppression is a recurring element of its history with Blacks.

Gates describes how, over time, captured Africans, despite facing the gut-wrenching realities of enslavement, found the capacity to fuel their religious imagination in the hidden spaces of the invisible institution. He rightly highlights the multiplicitous manifestations of Black religious imagination in the music and spoken word of the religious expressions of the enslaved. Gates is attentive to the democratization of religion during the First and Second Great Awakenings, a period instrumental to the influx of Blacks into Christianity. While Gates emphasizes the varied religious traditions of Blacks, inclusive of the prominence of Islam, he highlights this period as one of the central moments in the growth of Protestant engagement by Blacks.

The growing scope of religious practices and the ability of those practices to address both spiritual and material concerns is evident throughout Gates' work. Whether it is the religious instincts evident in the rise of the Pentecostal church and the Holiness movement in the late 1800s or the Black church's role in the run-up to emancipation and reconstruction, his account emphasizes both the importance of Black churches as spaces for religious experience and as centers of communal action for the Black community. Additionally, the paradoxical role of the Black church in supporting the pursuit of the rights of Black men or the election of Black political figures following the Fifteenth Amendment while concurrently denying equality to the women of its own community would repeat itself throughout the history of the Black church. Gates' portrayal of the Black church extends to its cultural contributions, tracing the lineage of gospel music from spirituals to its influence on secular music and political movements. Gates examines the critical and complex historical role of the Black church during the Great Migration and Civil Rights, along with the challenges faced by the Black church post-1960s, including its role in social justice movements. In essence, this book sheds light on the multifaceted nature of the Black church, noting that it has been a source of spiritual renewal, political power, and a force for change throughout history.

However, this book is but one of many well-written attempts to chronicle the history of the Black church. As such, it is reasonable to ask what this effort offers that prior efforts did not. It may well be that the answer to this question is more about timing. The history of the Black church affirms its historic role as a communal institution, consistently and courageously affirming the potential and promise of Black life under the most arduous of circumstances. Yet, in this contemporary moment, the demands from the Black community for justice birthed by the many occasions of social, political, and economic assault on Black life bring the Black church's role into sharp critique. Additionally, deteriorating socio-economic conditions are pointed to as

evidence of the Black church's diminished impact or influence. It may well be that Gates has responded to the particularity of this moment by offering a timely reminder of the power and historical impact of the Black church. Gates offers an objective review of the Black church's history and is unsparing in his attention to the many places where the Black church has fallen short of its lofty aspirations. Nonetheless, ever present in this work is the portrait of an institution whose gifts and contributions to the Black community may, in this moment, go under-appreciated.

The Black Church offers a compelling and insightful analysis of the Black church's historical significance, cultural relevance, and its continuous impact on the American story. With rich storytelling and historical evidence, the book showcases the resilience, community, and empowerment found within the past of the Black church and hoped for in its future.

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