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Review – Lisa Allen, *A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness*

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***A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness.* Lisa Allen. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. 2021. 231 pp. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-62698-444-8**

Emmy-award-winning pastor, professor, musician, liturgist and theologian Dr. Lisa Allen describes *A Womanist Theology of Worship* as her “love letter to the Black Church.” In addition to emerging from her many years of musical and ministry experience, Allen’s interest in womanist liturgical theology intensified after a faculty lecture she offered for the Interdenominational Theological Seminary in Atlanta. During her presentation Allen voiced deep concerns for the decline and closure of the Black Churches of her youth, adulthood, observation, and research. She also noted that present-day protest movements, in response to police brutality against People of Color, did not emerge from Black Church communities as they had in the recent and historic past. These realities cause her to question if the roots of the diminishment are, at least in part, the result of a contemporary separation between Black Church liturgical practice and communal acts of prophetic justice.

While acknowledging that Black churches are not monolithic, Allen posits that clues to the sources of these communal and liturgical challenges can be understood by exploring commonalities in the history and trajectory of Black worship in the United States. Based on the research of scholars such as Albert Raboteau, Allen supports her thesis beginning with descriptions of the spirituality of captured African peoples and continues with excerpts from accounts of the secret hush harbor gatherings of the enslaved and Praise House worship services overseen by slave owners and their designees. She continues with an analysis of the demonstrative experience of Black conversions to Christianity and worship during the rural revivals of the first two Great Awakenings (c. 1730–1755, c. 1790–1840). Allen’s research on spirituality in colonial and antebellum African American communities includes worship in independent Black Churches and rebellions of the enslaved led by preachers, as well as the founding of northern Black Church communities from protests against discrimination. After recounting the worship experience of Black churches following the Civil War and Reconstruction, Allen then moves to the effects of the Great Migration (c. 1916–70) on southern and northern Black Churches. Based on her musical knowledge, she includes a brief history of the evolution from

spirituals to hymn-singing and gospel music in Black churches during this period. Her retelling of Black Church history then leads to the experiences that eventually birthed and sustained the modern Civil Rights Movement.

One strength of this text is its concise tracing of the historic trajectory of Black Churches in the United States. Those studying the history of the Black Church and the national religious movements happening as it developed in the United States will find this a useful overview. Allen also provides succinct and understandable definitions of basic concepts, such as liturgy, worship, and liturgical theology. She offers plentiful examples and quotations from theological, liturgical, and historical scholars of the Black Church experience.

Unfortunately, Allen leaves Black Catholics out of the narrative. From historic persons such as 16th century African Catholics of the Kingdom of the Kongo to those enslaved in South Carolina who planned and lead the Stono Rebellion (1739) to Black Catholic Civil War soldiers' spirituals to Black Catholic churches during the Great Migration and subsequently the Civil Rights Movement, Black Catholic experience is missing. This omission is surprising since Allen writes of religious experiences people brought with them from African homelands and the rebellions against enslavement based on the preaching of Black leaders such as Nat Turner (1831). Additionally, though her focus is on historic Black church communities, Allen also recounts the experience of other African Americans belonging to majority-White denominations such as Anglican, Presbyterian, etc.

After moving through Black Church history, with a particular focus on preaching, worship and right relationships within and beyond these communities, Allen asks how Black Churches could move back towards connecting liturgy with justice, as happened when conversions lead to rebellions and Black worship encouraged the mobilization that undergirded mass protests and helped bring change to unjust local and national laws. She also strongly critiques today's Black Church communities, calling for a move beyond misogyny in leadership, homophobic theology, and the physical and theological invisibility of differently abled persons. Based on the history, strengths, weaknesses, and unjust exclusions of these churches Allen then proposes a reconnection and expansion of justice-making in the Black Churches through a paradigm for Black worship focused through a Womanist lens.

Allen first offers a carefully detailed basic explanation of Womanist theology and ethics, describing the work of Delores Williams, Katie Cannon, and other foundational womanist scholars. She then moves her focus to explaining a womanist hermeneutic of suspicion, a theology of Incarnation, a re-imagining of God, and finally encourages a use of Womanist spirituality in Black Church liturgy and worship. Several of her suggestions will be familiar to those who have studied preaching, worship, and practical liturgy in seminary settings: community reflection on current worship, planning, execution, evaluation, and repetition of this process in an ongoing circle of praxis. This text, filled with accessible Black Church history, would also be useful for study groups within individual communities. It is my hope that a future edition will include excluded Black Churches, also facing the challenges of decline and closure, that could be encouraged to evaluate their preaching and worship practices through a Womanist lens.

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