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Review – Vincent W. Lloyd, *Black Natural Law*

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***Black Natural Law.* Vincent W. Lloyd. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. viv, 162pp. \$58.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780199362189**

In *Black Natural Law* Vincent W. Lloyd, introduces a “tradition” of African American natural law. Black Christian writers are often confined to the category of “history” or of “practice,” but are rarely considered as contributors to the intellectual disciplines of “theological thought” or “Christian ethics.” Lloyd reverses this tendency by dismantling the boundaries between Christian ethics, American political history, and black religion. He moves the reader to question the hierarchical dualism between thought and practice and our habit of associating white Christianity with thought and black Christianity with practice. His aim is to demonstrate that “African Americans have their own tradition of ethical and political reflection” that is not only autonomous from European and Catholic notions of natural law, but it “gets things right” where they go wrong (ix).

According to Lloyd, black natural law contains several features that make it distinct from its European counterparts. To begin, black natural law is rooted in the black experience; therefore, the critique of white ideology is at the heart of black natural law, as is the organizing of social movements as a practical outgrowth of that critique. Furthermore, black natural law is distinctive because it understands reason and emotion as mutually informing as opposed to the European and Thomistic accounts of natural law that reductively emphasize reason over and against emotion. Through a survey of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Anna Julia Cooper, and Martin Luther King Jr., as well as a coordinated series of laws, namely, God’s law, moral law, and civic law, Lloyd pulls these features together and identifies a coherent tradition of natural law in African American Christianity. He concludes that black natural law is, therefore, not the result of rational introspection, but rather the inner telos of collaboration of *all* of human nature, including emotion and imagination.

Lloyd also makes a provocative historical argument; namely, that the black natural law tradition began to decline after the civil rights movement and is currently in a state of disarray. He writes that “elements of black natural law continued to be invoked in various ways during the decades that followed the civil rights movement—invoked in ways that were disconnected from the tradition” (120). He shows that

literary, activist, and political uses of natural law ideas within black communities have lost the coherence and distinctive features that they once had. This argument includes unique critiques and interpretations of black cultural, political and legal figures such as James Baldwin, Barack Obama, and Clarence Thomas.

At times, Lloyd seems to shift between his interpretive work and his constructive claims about black natural law. The constructive categories applied by Lloyd to several black leaders unearth new possibilities for reading them together, but, at the same time, it appears that he may be forcing their ideologies to fit into his categories. It is possible that these moments of uncomfortable mismatching are a result of Lloyd's attempt to formulate black natural law completely autonomous from its European and Thomistic counterparts. The book also seems to assume a certain level of familiarity with European ideology regarding natural law. For example, Lloyd asserts European natural law "focus[es] exclusively on the human capacity to reason," yet he does not cite which natural law theory he is specifically referring to (38). Furthermore, secondary sources could have been used more effectively; for example, how have other scholars understood Douglass's invocation of natural law concepts? These quarrels are trivial, though, in light of the thought-provoking arguments that Lloyd offers.

This is an informative text for scholars working in Christian ethics, American religious thought, or black Christianity. While the book draws particularly on African American resources, it will challenge every reader to reconsider the way they understand natural law. *Black Natural Law* would fit well on upper-level undergraduate and graduate syllabi in the fields of theology, Christian ethics, American history, and politics.

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