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Review – Vincent W. Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology*

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***Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology.* Vincent W. Lloyd Fordham University Press, 2018, 218 pp.**

This work sheds compelling light and substantive critique on the intersections and interplay of black theology and (black) secularism. Reflecting on the prophetic traditions, hopes, and criticism of black theology, Lloyd makes clear that (black) secularism must constitute the intellectual's primary focus of black theological critique. He skillfully argues that Black theology has become dislodged not only from its original ambition but also from its original intent—the religion of the oppressed or rather the Religion of the Field Negro. All theology is black theology, and all social criticism is theological. Thus, Black theology embodies and reifies social criticism and social criticism embodies and reifies Black theology.

Lloyd asserts that the embrace of secularism by preachers and theologians, especially black preachers and theologians framed as (black) theology or even the progress of (black) theology has blurred the distance between the human and the divine. Secularism is defined as the exclusion or management of religion by those in power. Secularists often believe the "ways" of the ephemeral world are bound by human existence and human possibility and cannot be transcended. Religion is shaped if not influenced by secularism meaning religion is a personal choice, an individual pursuit defined by normative claims that align with ambient values. For black secularists, this often means domesticating revolutionary impulses, turning away from revolutionary change to incremental change or turning away from religion altogether. Each entangles the Black secularist with the disciplining impulses of modernity, with neoliberal ideology and with Western imperialism undermining the particular contribution that black theology must make to the intellectual discussions surrounding the critique of secularism

Secularism regulates theology to the status of one among many disciplines with their grand theories and ideologies while delimiting theology's hold on disciplines is tenuous at best. Ideologies like multiculturalism embraced by some black secularists' limits an understanding black theology to one of many ways to pluralize theology. In turn, Black Theology's role in social critique is subsumed or essentialized under the cultural umbrella of religio-multiculturalism often resulting in racial coalitions seeking a voice and place for incremental

change on the terms of white consciousness and therein white religious expression.

Lloyd is convinced a need exists to revive black theology. To accomplish this important task, the question of secularism must be named, and it must be addressed forthrightly. The rejection of secularism by black secularist theologians can begin the process of returning black theology to its origins and its intent meaning black theology will again be social criticism and social criticism will be theology. He argues the urgency of the return to an unabashedly black and unabashedly theological tradition and critique obscured by black secularism.

In *Religion of the Field Negro*, Black secularism represents the antagonists while Black theology represents the protagonists. Lloyd's central claim is that grappling with black secularism is the pre-requisite not only to black theology but to all theology. He draws upon seminal thinkers like James Cone, James Baldwin, Joseph Mbembe, Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben to shed light on Black theology and secularism as theological thought. Four chapters titled as questions follow the analysis of black secular thinkers seeking to shed light on black tradition, black organizing, black hope and white hope. The remaining four chapters situate black secularism through the lived experiences of black leaders and their relevance, expected or unexpected to black theology and lived black experiences.

This unique and important book illuminates a long-needed analysis of the complications of black theological reflection when boundaries of race are made opaque and the boundaries between secular and the sacred are blurred.

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